

The
Golden Feather

BY THEDA KENYON

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TO
MARION PETERSON HEISER
*who first opened to me
the gates of Colonial Virginia*

Author's Note

There is no mental adventure more stimulating than writing a "period story." There is none so much fun—nor, I dare say, harder work. I often wonder whether the reader has any notion of the hours of research, the weary "museum feet," that lurk behind the cloak-and-sword. In the same breath, I realize that if he *has*, the author has failed. For the atmosphere and facts so laboriously gathered must be assimilated until they lose all strangeness and seem as much a part of everyday life as the subways and skyscrapers against which we move today, or the people of the tale will never be more than puppets, shying from tasks which they actually performed as a matter of course.

So I hope that when Gerald walks through the narrow, dark streets of London, or hurries along the sinister and busy waterfront by Queenshyte and Black Fryers, no one will suspect the cracked yellow pages of an ancient book, *The Port of London*. When Ajax adjusts matchlock musket and bandoleer, I pray you may see him clean and clear, not through the blur of *The Historie Booke*, privately printed for the Ancient and Honourable Artillery Company of the Massachusetts. Much of my research for the Bay Colony and Aquidneck had, of course, been done for *Scarlet Anne*; but so many additional and exact details were needed for this that I again found myself with a deskful of books. Nevertheless, when Mistress Bradstreet and Mistress Winthrop treat the massacre victims after the manner most approved by medical science, may they come alive and stand beside you in their courage and self-control, frail English gentlewomen battling a wilderness—not mere shadows of portraits in *Builders of the Bay Colony* and *Every Day Life in Massachusetts Bay Colony*.

There are of course endless side lines in such a tale as this. Never would I have dared, without the authority of such experts as Chappelle¹ and Bowen,² to assert that a ship was built by Englishmen on New England soil thirteen years before the *Mayflower* landed. Nor would I venture to chat knowingly of the growing of tobacco in seventeenth-century Virginia, without exploring the matter through the eyes and heartbreak of men whose work it was. And when Clarissa compares the standard of living of the ladies of the Massachusetts, with that of the ladies of the Virginia Colony, there are wills and letters and household bills and Bruce's helpful *Economic History of Virginia*, all in a dozen lines, though it may startle our justly proud Virginians to discover that, since their ancestors' interest was chiefly in the soil, the houses of New England were both larger and more elaborate than those of the South.

It may also be a shock to some of them to know that, besides their notably aristocratic stock, two groups of girls were sent from England to Virginia (90 in 1619 and 60 in 1620) as wives for the settlers, and that wives cost from 120 to 150 pounds of tobacco—three times the price of a young kid; and that, in 1619 and 1620, two hundred lads, chosen as sound in limb and brain from among the "worthy poor" of various parishes, were sent over to Virginia as apprentices, each to be given fifty acres, tools, and arms on his twenty-first birthday, having fulfilled the apprenticeship period; and to become thenceforth a free landowner, and presumably a revered ancestor. And, incidentally, they nobly deserved both rewards!

Coffin's masterly *Laud, Storm Centre of Stuart England* was my constant companion for months. And the work of Evelyn,³ Abbott,⁴ Aikin,⁵ Ashley,⁶ Green,⁷ Banks,⁸ and many

¹ *History of American Sailing Ships.*

² *America Sails the Seas.*

³ *Diary.*

⁴ *Charles I.*

⁵ *Memoirs of the Court of Charles I.*

⁶ *Oliver Cromwell.*

⁷ *Short History of the English People.*

⁸ *Planters of the Commonwealth.*

others, all enter the picture. A charming book on old gardens helped me to clip Charlotte's topiary beasts, to plant Mistress Winthrop's white-satten, and to lay out Clarissa's sundial. Finally, just as I was despairing of historic evidence for the climax of the whole story, a little old book from my grandfather's library⁹ gave me the clue I needed and had hunted through a dozen more pretentious volumes. There really was a massacre in Virginia in April 1644, quite as serious as that of 1622.

But the whole tapestry has not been woven from books, or records, or museum cases and Van Dyck portraits. My deep gratitude is due to Paul North Rice, Chief of the Reference Department of the New York Public Library; to Mary T. Quinn, Assistant in Charge of Archives of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations; and to Adelaide Faron and the Staff of the Hempstead Public Library. Sometimes I suspect that librarians are secretly convinced that all authors are mildly insane, and you would know how well founded their conviction is if you were to be told their experiences, as they patiently hunted ambergris and Royal governesses, tobacco and the *amours* of the Court of Charles I, transportation on the James by barge, and by pack ox in the wilds of Aquidneck (details I could not find even in Dunbar's comprehensive *History of Travel in America*) and finally the personal peculiarities of the Fathers—and Mothers—of our country.

And if you really want a job, try to find out what the excellent settlers of Henrico looked like, whether they were mild or temperry, and how many children each had in 1644. But I warn you, if you really want to read *The Golden Feather*, you'd better do it before you start *that* bit of research, or you'll *never* get round to it!

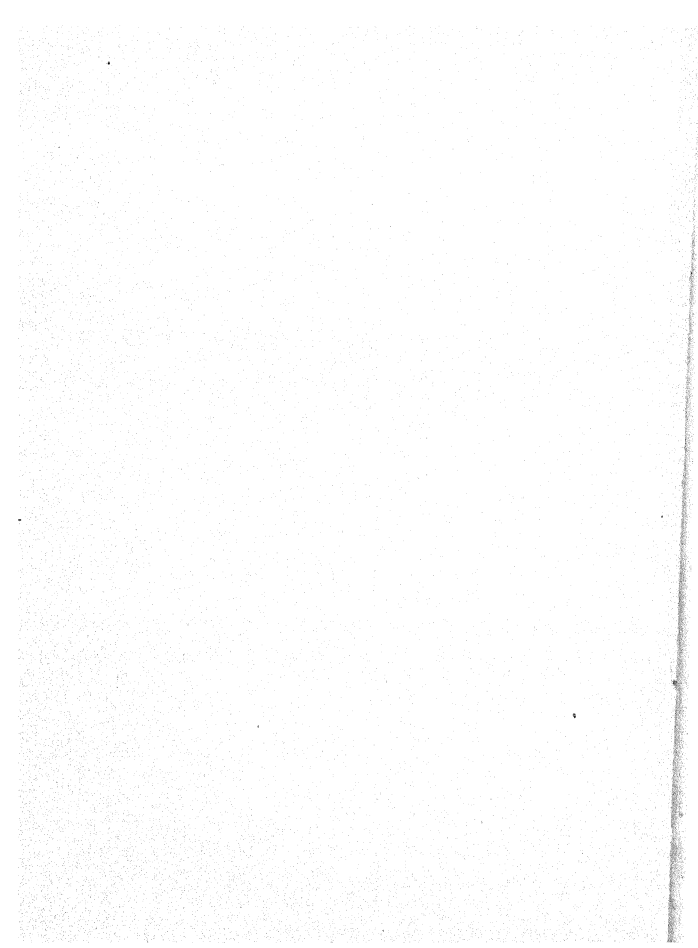
⁹ *History of the United States in Chronological Order, A.D. 432 to Present.*

This was the year, and this the hour
Of insidious root and bitter flower,
When the child sucked fear at the breast of his mother,
And no man met the eyes of his brother.
This was the year when Satan stood
In cassock and surplice, stole and hood,
When jealousy guarded Heaven's gate,
And the way of the Cross was the way of hate;
When a man's name struck from the parish roll
Assured damnation to his soul,
And Hell was foreshadowed by the pyre,
For the will of Jehovah was writ in fire.
This was the year of the riderless horse,
Of a cry on the wind and blood on the gorse,
Wind on the field and wind on the moor,
And terror beating a bolted door.
This was the year when a man might slip
By graft or luck to a midnight ship,
Where cyclone and scurvy and calm were stored
To avenge a cheated and angry LORD:
Yet the hour when a few, meek and mighty, dared
To buttress salvation with strong breasts bared,
Though the way of their courage might prove to be
The terrible way of Calvary.

From SCARLET ANNE

I

STACYS HOLDING



I

GERALD STACY was definitely out of sorts. He always was, when there was no pretty, and receptive, girl within clasp of his lean brown fingers. But the malady was exaggerated today by the scent of spring in the air, the fact that he had overslept, so missing the last hunt of the season, and the utterly unexpected marriage of one of the prettiest and most receptive wenches with whom he had ever shared a bed.

What had ailed Matilda he could not imagine. She had appeared at Stacys Holding over two months before. He could still see her, bobbing and smiling sidewise under rounded lids, her plump person pleasantly tempting, outlined against the tall leaded window, with the gleam of snow beyond. She had asked for "work," and the lilt of her voice and curve of her lip had informed Gerald, who was fortunate enough to spy her before his brother Ajax did, of the precise kind of work she sought, which conveniently suited both his habit and inclination. They had got on very well, without too much emotion spent. Indeed, the first real emotion Gerald had felt was his fiery and resentful astonishment this morning, when his awakening bellow for her evoked only the bootboy, who sniggered a little over the information the girl had gone to Church with the baker's apprentice, some three hours ago.

So the day had been spoiled for Gerald, even before he had discovered the hunt had begun without him, and started back to Stacys Holding disconsolately. Now, slumped on a bank, fuzzy with a hint of new grass, he looked about on a world obviously created for enjoyment. As far as he could see, the pleasant rolling country of Buckinghamshire spread, a tender yellow-green with the promise of spring. In sheltered, sunny hollows there were already violets, and the outline of

the house, foursquare and solid as his ancestor who had built it, was softened by the froth of leaves just piercing the branches of its overhanging, great trees. Since childhood, the hill where he now sat had been a favorite viewing-place for the house. It was the exact spot where the Stacy land began, and he and Ajax had played many a game of pursuit and escape with this bank as Sanctuary. But now, looking about, he felt baffled. Why should any day be spoiled for a gentleman as handsome, as powerful, as gallant as Master Gerald Stacy? In spite of the dreary pratings of roundhead preachers, and the half-sensed senseless rumble of furtive-eyed fanatic groups in tavern and on wharf, it was clearly the Will of God that gentlemen like him should be happy. Why else had Providence so hedged them about with all the appointments of happiness? In return, they gave so much happiness to others; provided, of course, this generosity did not interfere with their own pleasure, which it seldom did, as they were clever and powerful enough to choose companions who were malleable, as well as congenial.

As for the wench who had just turned the whole pattern topsy-turvy—she was unprecedented. Gerald Stacy always tired of his women before they were past wondering at the beauty of his person, and excellence of his technique. But this Matilda— And for a baker's apprentice! There was something almost blasphemous in it. A young rowdy with large red hands, no doubt, which even the occupational flour could not disguise! Gerald glanced at the finely pointed, deceptively slender fingers Van Dyck had praised, and shook his head; but remained as baffled as before. Providence would see to Matilda. Without doubt, she would live to repent her ingratitude. He only regretted he would not witness her discomfiture, since, obviously, he could have no hand in it. A matter of vanity. Or honor. The two had an inconvenient way of becoming confused, in matters of the heart. Who could say, for example, whether it had been Arthur's honor, or his vanity, pointing Guinevere's way to the stake? Or pos-

sibly the whole contretemps had sprung from the Royal laziness, or a dull preoccupation with the Grail. A conclusion which left his own problem unchanged, since he was never lazy or preoccupied when there was a woman about. He yawned again, tipped his broad-brimmed hat with its fine golden feather over his eyes, and was on the point of easing his full length to the bank when the sharp cry of a child, and the sound of running and jeering, jerked him back to his elbow, at the precise instant that a stone, its force spent, rolled at his side.

The sheer effrontery of that swept him to his feet, laziness gone.

"God's final Name!" he bellowed. "Can a gentleman no longer take his ease on his own heath without—"

The sentence broke. A boy had turned the curve of the road. He made no sound but for the pitiful rasping of his breath, though blood oozed between the fingers pressed to his forehead. A yowling mob of farmer boys pursued him, too intent on their quarry to note the gentleman who suddenly stood directly in their path.

"Back, you hellcubs! What are we come to that an English freeman shall be so beset on his own acres?"

His tone, as much as the lustily swung crop, gave his words authority, and in the instant's pause, one of them, quicker of wit than his fellows, saw the rich clothes, the fallen feathered hat.

"Stop!" he screamed, "Mark the feather—and the curls! Stop, or we'll all rot in the stocks! *He's* no devils spawn, like the brat!"

At the first cry, they had checked. Before the final word, they had disappeared, like rats into accustomed holes. Gerald reached back, and pulled the cringing boy from behind him.

"What's the meaning of this uproar?" he demanded. "What's your offense?"

The lad had regained his breath and was set to make good use of it.

"The righteous shall be persecuted for His Name's sake," he lisped solemnly, "but surely our God is a Rock of Defense!"

Gerald's brows shot up. "God's final Name!" he gasped, when he had somewhat recovered, but even that round oath had lost its flavor. "You don't say!"

"Not I, but the Word of Our God," the child piped, wiping his bloody face on a torn sleeve.

Gerald drew a square of golden silk from China out of his pocket.

"Here— This will serve better. No, do not look askance, little roundhead. Be glad of its comfort, rather. Neither you nor I will slide to Hell the faster, for its sleekness. Who are you, and how came you here?"

"Master Milton plucked me from Billingsgate, the last time he was in London. My father and mother—" he stopped, his face twisted.

"Ah," said Gerald hastily, "So. I see. But why did you not tell your tormentors you were Master Milton's boy?"

"I did, Master. That made matters worse." He cringed back. "Possibly you do not know, Master, that Master Milton has abjured taking Holy Orders, saying to Laud's face he would rather speak truth as he sees it—"

"Of course, I know," Gerald interrupted, "and what of it? Eh? Is that so new a notion? So they stoned you, because an Englishman cherishes his freedom! Is that the way of it?"

"Aye," the child cried, venomously, "they are a wicked, narrow—"

"Wait! Not so fast. These things are turn about, if I mistake not. Remember, then, should cause ever arise, that you owe your own life to a feather and a crisping pin—and be as generous, in your turn."

He spun about, frowning, leaving the boy staring. The day was addled, no doubt of it, and the sooner he was done with it the better. He clapped his hat back on his head, and cut

into the woods, determined to drink himself into a stupor that would last till cockcrow ushered in a saner sun.

But even this solace was denied him. He had not gone a dozen steps when a voice hailed him. It seemed to come from the trees, and was so high and piping it might have been a bird's, but that no bird would inquire if he did not find it overwarm for the season. Yet if it were not a bird, what was it? There was no one in sight, though the conviction rose and grew that a pair of mocking eyes watched him, as he pivoted like a puzzled pinwheel, growing redder and hotter by the moment, for his pains.

He was about to go on, leaving the unseen speaker to her silly riddle, when a rustling of leaves, and a peal of laughter, caught his gaze upward to a green figure perched among the branches.

He stared and stared, convinced this was the final test for his sanity, until something in the eyes, set wide apart in the smiling white face, reminded him of a kitten, treed by a dog. But even as he pitied it, he saw it was a velvet-clad kitten, most delicately made, with a strangely familiar, pointed little face.

Leaning forward, it now assured him confidentially, "This is the very first time, in all my life, I ever climbed a tree!"

"Why did you, now?"

"I had nothing else to do."

Irritation grew in Gerald. Vaguely, he sensed he was again about to be involved in unpleasant adventure. "And must you always have something to do?" he demanded. "God's final Name, am I to spend my life rescuing crackpot infants?"

The silence that greeted this outburst had a strange quality, as if the very trees were shocked. Then the voice came again, this time in clipped syllables, edged with frost.

"You will assist me to descend, and we will speak no further of it."

Gerald stared. He was already half out of his coat, but the

calm authority of the statement caught him unawares, arms pinioned, through the one moment of his life that proved fatal. He cried, "Wait!" and flung himself forward, but the little girl, anxious to end the matter, had left her meager corner of safety.

Her hand missed the branch she strove to catch, her gold spur snagged the hem of her velvet habit. There was a crash of twigs, and she lay at his feet, alarmingly still, with one arm strangely twisted beside her.

Gerald, bending, was struck again by her familiarity. Undoubtedly the daughter of a neighboring noble—but whose? Rack his brains as he would, he could not place her. But whoever she was, she could not be left here, to tempt any vagrant, with her rich clothes. No. He must take her home. He did not relish it, being as well aware as his neighbors that Stacys Holding was no asylum for virtuous maidenhood. He and Ajax had seen to that, in the ten years they had lived there alone, with their dogs, and their servants, and their mistresses. Not that he or Ajax had ever offended a lady of virtue. Why should they, indeed, with the world so conveniently cluttered with tarts of every degree? It would be greater difficulty to discover a chaste woman than to win her. Still— This child—

He lifted her gently, knowing that even had she been older and beautiful he could not have desired her. There was something about her, small as she was, that chilled him. He did not know what it was, he only knew it was so, and therefore resented the more the reception he got, when he set foot on his own terrace.

They were all there, all seventeen of the servants, from the old housekeeper, Dolly Wimple, to the Boots who had told him that morning of Matilda's faithlessness. Oh, not lined up openly, of course. But peering and prying from behind window curtain and arras and tree, with stealthy appraisal. Knowing it, he stopped in the driveway, bellowing.

"Out, do you hear me? Out here—all of you!"

They came, with suspicious promptness.

"This young lady fell from her horse," he told them.

Dolly Wimple bobbed, the tail of her eye flicking the others.

"As you say, Sir."

"As *you* will say. Do you understand? So much as a whisper to the contrary, and I swear I'll have you to the whipping post, and the skin flayed from your bones!"

He stared them all down, the corner of his mouth caught pleasurably. The Stacy men were lax enough masters, but once crossed in a serious matter could be merciless. He gave them time to remember that, and turned on Boots.

"You, there— Fetch a leech."

"A leech, Master? Yes, Master. A leech. . . . Where?"

"Where? What do I care where? Fetch him, that's all. God's final Name, are you rusted to the step? Must I oil your legs?"

But the boy was running, vaguely, anywhere, eyes over shoulder, stumbling in meaningless haste.

Gerald grinned. "That's better," he nodded. "Obedience. Obedience is the law of God. And the Stacys'." He started for the house. "Red up the east chamber, Wimple," he ordered, "and mind—all of you—not a word of this matter when my brother returns. Do you understand? Send him to me before a breath escapes you, or I swear by every new saint in Laud's Kalendar, that breath'll be your last!"

II

"Out upon it, I have loved
Three whole days together!
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather."

OVER THE morning-bright hills of Buckinghamshire, Ajax Stacy's song rang with the tallyho, mingling pleasantly with the cry of the hounds, and laughter of his companions, joyous with the lust for killing.

When he laughed, he flung up his head, and the sun flashed from his strong white teeth and dappled his red-brown eyes with brook lights, and the man who rode beside him smiled in sympathy, though his smile seemed withdrawn, as if he could not enter fully into his friend's light-heartedness.

Harry Vane was no less handsome or vital than Ajax. His twenty-four years exactly matched the other's. But it was evident that something had tempered his youth, whittling arrogance to pride, and gaiety to a deeper, and less frequent, pleasure. He turned to Ajax now, his lips grave.

"A jest—?"

Stacy laughed again. "No jest—unless it's a jest to be alive on a day like this. A jest to be young with the year, and feel the blood in you run like sap in the trees. Yes—possibly—a jest. God's jest. Look, Harry—" he swung out his hand, and the sun flashed from the embroidery on his doeskin glove. "Look, and laugh with me. Surely, no living creature can help rejoicing on a day like this."

"Except the fox."

Ajax stared, then guffawed. "Gad, you've lost none of your

wit. The fox! Now who but you would have thought of the fox? Gad, what a jest *that* is!"

"I was in earnest," Vane said, reflecting that Ajax's mouth, still open with what had been a laugh, yet twisted with bewilderment, was somehow symbolic of all English youth.

"In dead earnest," Vane repeated, "though my thoughts outstripped Reynard, I'll admit." He paused, sighing heavily. "I'm sick of hunting," he admitted. "Sick—for the hunted. I'm sick of being one of the pack—or the mob—what you will; always after some bright brave creature, with instincts surer than my own—" he broke off bitterly. Stacy continued to stare. It sharpened Vane's voice. "God, man," he exclaimed irritably. "Are you blind? Is all England blind? Blind and deaf, moving in a stupor of self-satisfaction—save for this few; this handful."

"What few?" demanded Ajax, staring about.

Vane's hand fell on his bridle. He spoke more gently, but no less earnestly. "You have courage, Ajax, and a brain. For God's sake, use them! I was blind as you, until my eyes were opened." He paused, and Ajax started at the challenge he read in the grim, set jaw, the direct gaze. "All England is a hunt, today. The deaf and blind—the men with power, who will not see or hear, because they are too comfortable to be disturbed—ride to hounds. And our people—English men and women—flee before the pack. The quarry's up, and the cry's *Conform, conform!* No, by God—We will not 'conform.' Nor will we be driven to a wilderness, to be murdered by savages, or die of starvation and plague!—Let them get out Magna Carta, if they dare, and burn it publicly at Whitehall! Let them—"

"Hush!" Stacy's hand fell over Vane's compellingly. "Be still, for Christ's sake! This is no time or place for—"

"I care not who hears me," Vane retorted, but he spoke less vehemently. "I have taken my stand. I have pleaded with the King himself. He agreed— But the next day, the next hour, the Queen and the tailor's son were after him." He

paused, his mouth twisting. "It's her fault," he charged. "The King is English, and would yield to English customs, but the Frenchwoman's bound him hand and foot, with her priests and her guile. She sees no need for Parliament, and Laud finds it inconvenient. So the King governs without it—God help him, poor gentleman—and save us all!"

Stacy said slowly, "Think what we may of Henrietta Maria, the King is—is—"

"The King is—the King," Vane interrupted. "In spite of his deafness to all warning. In spite of what happened to Buckingham, and Parliament's forcing the Petition of Right on him, and the witches' brew bubbling over in Scotland in the Solemn League and Covenant—The King is the King, and the King can do no wrong!"

There was pain in his eyes, and new lines slashed sharply downward from his mouth. Ajax stared at him curiously.

"I can't understand you," he admitted finally. "The King is your friend—and you, his—" there was frank envy, as well as bewilderment in his tone, and Vane smiled grimly.

"That is the root of my trouble," he admitted. "Only a man's friends can hurt him. You have to love a person greatly to care what he does. When you do, it is agony to find him less than perfect." His dark eyes searched Stacy's face. He laughed ruefully. "I'm not mad," he answered the other's expression. "You see, I am not like the others. I love the King—for himself."

They rode in silence for some minutes. Then, unable longer to control the thought hammering at his tongue, Ajax blurted: "There are plenty to say your stand for the Puritans springs from your love for someone else."

The blood swept up under Vane's dark skin, but his head was held even higher. "I will not deny it," he admitted quietly. "I do love her. More, possibly, than you can realize. It would be worth my life to serve her. Worth many lives, had I more than one to give."

Ajax exclaimed, "But she's old enough to be your mother!"

"She is as old as Eve," Vane smiled, "and younger than tomorrow."

"And married—"

Vane nodded. "To a man she loves beyond all else," he said steadily.

Ajax shook his head. "It sounds like madness to me."

"It would be," Vane agreed, "were the woman any other than Anne Hutchinson. You have not seen her, so you cannot understand. Every man who knows her is aware of that strange, compelling force in her. It—it's part of the earth—of everything that is strong and natural and courageous— Call it what you will; the fact remains that no one can know her, and remain unchanged. Some resent it, of course— Winthrop and his kind. They hate her, and they lead the pack." He smiled at Stacy, his mouth caught up bitterly. "Make no mistake—I love her; as a man loves a woman; but since that is hopeless—" He paused, frowning slightly, trying to unravel his own emotion. Suddenly, he smiled. "Do you remember, in the Middle Ages, how men rode out proudly on lost causes, wearing the scarf of some lady they had hardly seen? And other men shut themselves away behind gray walls, to kneel forever before the Virgin's image? I can't explain it; you may think it isn't sane, or even healthy. But some women without effort command men's service, and their lives." He shrugged. "That's all. But it has shaped the destiny of empires, before this."

Stirred in spite of himself, Ajax rode silently for several minutes. Something had happened to Vane, during his brief absence from England. He had gone to Massachusetts Bay a blithe enough lad, a good companion, and not overthoughtful. The roots of this had been in him, of course; he had defied Laud and the College of Oxford; but his friends, once it was established his "originality" had not forfeited the Royal favor, had passed the matter over with a smile and shrug, which was easy enough, since he had not forced his peculiar notions on them. But now, it seemed, matters had

changed. Vane's conscience had been whetted, and was pricking at his behavior. Even more inconvenient, it occasionally nicked his friends, making them uncomfortably aware that gentlemen could think, and would better do so, if Merrie England were to remain merry; that not all dissenters had been hustled into jail, or overseas; and that the High Commission and Star Chamber, instead of wiping out the plague, had apparently only served to spread it.

Ajax had never pursued the idea so far before. Now, glancing at Vane's taut face, he recalled their long years of friendship, and the mockery that he had shared with fashionable London, over Vane's passion for a middle-aged female preacher, faded.

"I'm sorry," he said gruffly. "I didn't understand."

Vane's full mouth tightened. He grasped Ajax's hand, meeting his look levelly.

"I know," he said. "Not many—like us—do. But—we must." He paused, searching for words. "We shall need to understand, before this is over, make no mistake, my friend. The end is not yet."

He loosed his grip, patted the other's hand lightly, and, spurring his horse, swept forward. In an instant, Ajax had caught up with him. Together, they joined the others—richly clad and laughing gentlemen, all trace of their conversation wiped from their faces, though it never would be from their hearts.

III

DOLLY WIMPLE had small liking for any of it, and the toss of her double chin and flicker of her white cap ruffle said so plainly. Master Gerald had ordered her to be civil, and speak the man fair, but what she knew and what she suspected were two matters, and let him try to pick her brains, if he would.

"I know naught but what I've told. He called us, and we found him holding her, hurt as she is. And he sent Boots for a leech, and—"

"Yes, yes. Beyond that, I know. But—before—"

"That's all of it, from A to Zed."

Loose lips in a blowsy face, the man thought. *Hands too nervous in her apron. With the house's reputation, there's more here than meets the eye, or my name's not Harvey.* "What of the young lady? Who is she?"

Dolly jumped at the snapped question, but she was too sharp for him.

"Who, indeed?" she countered. "I didn't born her. That's all I know."

Let him choke on that pill, she thought, *with his prying and prating*. Her experience with physicians and her use for them were well mated. She had little of either, having more fondness for the local wisewoman, whose herbs and simples did a body more good, if one had faith in them, than all the bleeding and burning in London.

"Do you mean you never saw her before?" he persisted, in feigned surprise.

"I did not. And I trust I shall not soon again, what with this and that and the whole house upside down, for a chit without sense to keep herself whole, and—"

"Illness is a nuisance to the hale and a sorrow to the suf-

ferer," he soothed. "Pray God we may yet do away with it."

"Do away with it!" Dolly was shocked. "What way to talk is that? Is it not clearly the will of God—"

"God have mercy on us, no! It is not. What record of illness was there in Eden?"

"Eve lost her rib, and there's small doubt she suffered—"

"'Twas Adam lost it, and there's *no* doubt he suffered, in consequence. And so has every man of us since!" He began walking up and down, turned sharply. "If you never saw this young lady before, it must have seemed odd to you she was brought here, in her need."

"We never question the young gentlemen's young ladies," Dolly said primly. "'Tis not for us to ask, Whence came this or that one? Though I will say some are no better than ourselves, out of bed, and stripped o' their tricks."

"Indeed?"

"Not that I speak of this one, mind. She's naught but a babe, but she's a fine lady by the linen next her skin. I have not clapped eyes on the like since Mistress Stacy's wedding shift, though what's that to you? You're here to cure the girl, not court her!"

"Quite so," agreed the doctor, the wrinkles around his eyes deepening. "I had no thought of courting her, I assure you."

"A child like that! I should hope not, indeed!"

"Some maids must be courted while still in the cradle, more's the pity," the doctor sighed. "Still, as you say, that is not my *métier*. Fortunately, I shall have small trouble curing her. A matter of days. Though a day, just now—Have you ever reflected that a day for some is worth a year to others? No? When one makes history, an hour changes centuries." He began pottering about, among the fine porcelains from the Orient, the Bohemian glass, the bindings from Venice and Spain. The Stacys had done themselves well for generations, he thought. It was a pity the lads had been left orphaned so young, to become a byword

in a reckless age. "There's no woman in the house, is there?" he asked, at last.

"But for myself and five maids, there's none. But we don't count, I see."

"I meant of the family."

"Not since Mistress Stacy died. Lady Elizabeth Staughton, she was, but she'd have none of 'Your Ladyship,' once she was wed to Master Stacy. That's the spit of her," and she tossed her chin again, this time toward the portrait of a lady, which occupied the place of honor above the great fireplace, the soft dress belying the fine-boned, aquiline face. "And have it as she would," Dolly continued, "none of us ever forgot who she was."

"I believe it," the physician answered sincerely. "A vast pity she died. A woman like that— God ha' mercy! Whatever is that?"

"Master Ajax back from the hunt," Dolly informed him, undisturbed by the yell that had split the silence. She started out of the room, but returned immediately. "You're to say naught to him of the trouble abovestairs," she warned. "There's to be no word of it, until he sees Master Gerald, whose rightful affair it is."

The doctor hesitated momentarily. Then, "Very well," he agreed, and moved a trifle to observe the man who had just entered the hall.

After his first shout, Ajax had stopped still, as if some unexpected atmosphere had caught him where he was. He stood with his fine head thrown back, a puzzled frown between his brows, unconsciously sniffing the air, like an animal which has picked up a strange scent.

What had happened, he did not know, nor where he had got the knowledge that it had happened. But as he stood there, he knew a change had come on Stacys Holding.

Frowning more deeply now, he lounged forward. "Within, there!" he yelled. "Have you all died and gone to Lucifer? Where in—" he stopped as the physician stepped into the

hall, holding up a protesting hand. But with the next breath he had recovered himself. "Who are you, popping up like a bat out of hell?" he demanded. "Wimple! Tanker! Who in Purgatory—"

"Please," the physician interrupted. "My name is Harvey; William Harvey. I am here by your brother's express bidding."

Astonishment and incredulity chased the irritation from Ajax's face. "Harvey," he echoed, "William Harvey! But you can't be. I know all about him. He is—"

"The King's physician," agreed the doctor calmly. "And I am he."

Ajax shook his head, as if to clear it of confusion. Gerald—Gerald had not been at the hunt—The King's physician—

Watching him, Harvey was struck by the change in the man before him. The full features thinned, the blood swept back from the red face, leaving it fine edged and pale as that of the woman in the portrait. A sudden dignity wrapped Ajax Stacy like a cloak.

"My brother—" he said, and his voice was hushed—"My brother—is not—"

"Your brother is quite well," Harvey said quickly. "He wishes to see you at once, I believe."

The color returned to Ajax Stacy's face, some of the warmth to his voice. Automatically, he turned toward the stairs, but Harvey observed that as he moved his gait was uncertain as a sleepwalker's. He started to speak, to warn the young man of what he would find above there; thought better of it and, picking up his dark, high-crowned hat, slipped out of the house.

After all, he thought, I have sufficient problems of my own—which, in view of the discovery he had made, was understatement.

Ajax Stacy went upstairs slowly. His brain was like a kaleidoscope, filled with patterns and impressions which changed almost before they took form. If Gerald was "quite

well," why had he not answered his hail? If Gerald was "quite well," what was William Harvey doing at Stacys Holding? So prominent a man—the author of *Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis*— Even Ajax had heard of that! To be sure, Harvey was likely mad, insisting in the face of all learned opinion that the arteries contained blood instead of air; but mad or not he was a man of prominence, the King's physician— Something was vitally wrong at Stacys Holding. He, Ajax, had known it the moment he set foot in it. Something was wrong—

Tanker tiptoed into the hall, spied Ajax, looked scared, and strove to tiptoe back again, but his master's strong finger, twisted in his neckband, yanked him about.

"What's wrong here?" he demanded. "How did that man get in?"

"Boots brought him," Tanker stuttered, evading the first question. "Master Gerald sent him for a leech, and he ran about asking everyone he saw for one, and finally met this one, roaming the woods and hallooing, and a lucky thing, too, if you ask me, Sir."

"That's not what I asked you," Ajax growled. "What I asked was—What's wrong?"

Gerald appeared abruptly. "Oh," he said. "It's you. Come in here." He grasped Ajax's arm, and drew him inside, shutting the door firmly. Then he motioned toward the bed.

Ajax strode across the room, to stare down at a very small figure which seemed even smaller in the huge bed, elaborate with hangings and counterpane of crewel.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "You can't, Gerald. Why—it's a child! A—a mere child—"

Gerald flung around, his lip curling. Ajax saw the rebellion, the bitterness in his eyes. "So," he exclaimed, "You, too!"

Their eyes locked. Then Ajax said more gently, "Tell me about it. I—don't understand."

"No," said Gerald, "you don't understand; but even you—"

You think what everyone else does—the servants, and that soft-mouthed doctor—” he strode the length of the room and back, his eyes blazing. “Answer me this: What would I be doing with *that?*” He tossed a scornful glance toward the bed.

Ajax eyed him cautiously, then shrugged. “God knows,” he admitted; then, as a new thought struck him, “Where’s Matilda?”

Gerald winced, frowned, then grinned sheepishly, as he realized he hadn’t given the baker’s bride a thought in hours. “God knows that, too,” he admitted. “She wed the baker’s apprentice this morning.”

Ajax’s eyes widened. He digested this bit of news silently, and then attempted to fit it into the rest of the pattern. Finally, he said, “So you got this one. . . . As our mother said—‘Act in haste, repent at leisure.’” He shrugged. “She hasn’t the meat of a two-day squab. Where did you get her?”

“I picked her off a tree,” Gerald informed him sarcastically. “Don’t look like that. It’s the truth. Now you can judge how many folk will believe me.”

“A tree,” repeated Ajax testingly. “What kind of a tree?”

“I have no notion,” Gerald answered. “But this sort of fruit may well mark the end of Eden.”

He crossed to the *armoire*, opened the door creakingly. From it, he took in gingerly fingers a garment of sheerest linen, webbed with convent lace.

“Come here,” he said, and when Ajax had obeyed, “Look.”

But it was not the linen nor the lace that held their fascinated gaze. It was the exquisitely embroidered device to which Gerald’s finger pointed portentously.

IV

THE SWEET warm smell of frying dough crept through Stacys Holding: insidiously through the leading-cracks of mullioned windows; under winter-shrunken doors; around the carven sweep of the main staircase, and up the narrow circular steepness of the one at the back—and finally into the great east bedchamber where a little girl lay drowsing. There, it even picked the lock of sleep, so that she opened her bright dark eyes, and sniffed contentedly, like a young animal hungrily welcoming food.

It was an unusual and pleasant experience, this smelling food as one lay abed, she reflected. At home, she never smelt cookery until trenchers and ewers were at her very door; though this was due less to any daintiness in the ménage than the vast distance between the kitchens and her apartments. This novelty added to her enjoyment.

All of life, she discovered happily, was novel. Ever since the instant when, escaping the plump, middle-aged lady who was forever at heel, she had decided to copy some small boys she had wistfully observed, and to climb a tree. It had been a great jest to hear her lady rustling this way and that, calling and calling; a great jest to go higher as the sound of her frenzy approached, until, with a last tremendous effort she had outdone herself—to discover, when the emergency was past, that the ground was a very long distance away, and a velvet habit more hampering than the brief breeches worn by the lads she had copied.

But even that had turned out well. Had it not been for her precarious situation, she would never have addressed the young gentleman who had run so pleasantly through her slightly fevered dreams, and had she not addressed him, she would not have been here, comfortably wriggling her warm

toes between linen sheets, and greedily sniffing frying dough. She would have been roused before this, however respectfully, and set about endless lessons: embroidery, singing, Spanish, German, Latin, dancing, the harp. To be rid of the endless prancing and prating of tutors was worth a greater price than the pain in her shoulder and the giddiness in her head.

She stirred, and peered around the bed curtains, and caught her breath as much with delight as the swift pain of her movement.

There he sat—or slumped, rather; shirt loosened at the throat as she had dreamed; long brown fingers relaxed—yet still curved over the dagger-grip, in silent witness of his guardianship of her; dark curls almost to his elbow, as his head sagged in sleep. Indignantly, she recalled how a man named Prynne had preached a long sermon about the wickedness of wigs—although her father himself wore one—leading off with a text from *Corinthians: Doth not nature itself teach you that if a man have long hair it is a shame unto him?* It might be a shame unto Mr. Prynne, but it certainly was no shame to the young gentleman in the great chair by the window.

She thought how cross he had been, and shivered delightedly over it. He snored gently, and she was engulfed in waves of adolescent wonder at this intimacy, convinced, at last, that some of the things which happened to princesses in Fairy Tales might happen to a Princess in real life. How splendid it was just to lie in bed, and smell good things which one would presently eat, and dream happy things which one would presently do! How much more pleasant than being hung with brocade and jewels, and led out like a show horse, before the ambassadors of Spain and France, behind each of whom lurked a shadowy and presumably complaisant master, matrimonially inclined. She had not liked the notion yesterday. Today, it was repugnant to her. Unless— But she sighed, knowing that would be impossible.

Only in Fairy Tales did Royal gentlemen ride about incognito, and live in manor houses in the country. Still, for the magic moment, one could dream.

He is so beautiful! she thought. *I am so glad I spoke to him! I am so glad I hurt myself!* And with the admission came the innocent love that once experienced blunts all later passion. So she lay staring at Gerald Stacy until the very power and hunger of her thoughts woke him.

He opened his eyes, saw her, jumped as at a spirit, and, suddenly recollecting everything, came toward her warily. With the best intentions in the world, he had put his head in a noose. *God grant it may not be a noose in all reality!* he thought, and ran a gingerly finger along his throat; frowning first to note the tremulous smile on the child's lips, and then, more deeply, to see the smile fade, the color drain, from the small face. *God's final Name!* he thought, horrified. *It can't be— Why, she's only a baby—* But reassure himself as he would, his long experience had taught him what that look meant in the eyes of any female creature, and even this child was a woman-thing, trained far past her years for the exacting fulfillment of her station. Impossible or not, she was in love with him. He advanced cautiously, determined to treat her like a child—like any other child, that was.

"You are quite safe," he assured her, and meeting the surprise in her eyes realized immediately it had not occurred to her she could be anything except safe. It exasperated him, as everything about her had exasperated him, and some of his reaction crept into his voice. "What made you climb that tree?" he demanded. "And whatever made you fall out of it?"

She hesitated a bare instant, and he realized she was thinking fast. "I wished to get up," she told him, "and when I did—I wished to get down."

Her small mouth closed over the words decisively. He knew there was an end to the matter. What he did not know

was that she had realized that an admission of her flight would have pointed to her identity, and that she innocently believed that, if she did not betray that, she could remain here—close to him.

"But how did you get there in the first place?" he demanded.

"I walked."

"Walked?" he eyed her suspiciously. "You were dressed for riding."

"But I wished to walk."

He opened his mouth, and closed it again. It was so evident she usually managed to do as she wished, by fair means or foul. She now said unexpectedly:

"Who are you?"

"Gerald Stacy," he answered absently, and then, deciding to let the matter head up, "Who are you?"

She lowered her eyes, but he had an impression they were amused, in spite of her demure tone. "You may call me Mary," she told him, tucking in the corners of her mouth as if she savored a sweetmeat.

"Mary—who?"

"Mary will suffice."

"Very well," he grinned, in spite of himself. "Very well—Mary."

"I like the way you say it," she told him. "You may kiss my hand."

He stared at her an indecisive instant, surprised and troubled; but then, assuring himself she was only aping her mother, he obeyed. There was laughter in his eyes, now, but she did not see that, for her own eyes were fixed wonderingly on the tips of her small fingers, which his lips had barely brushed. He stood back, observing her, realizing what he had done. Entering her child's game, he had stolen the birthright of her womanhood.

"Don't!" he pleaded sharply. "Don't look that way—Mary—I— See—I have something for you—"

"What?" But he knew she asked it out of sheer politeness. Her eyes, her mind, still fixed upon her fingers.

"You will see!" he assured her with a heartiness he was far from feeling and started toward the door.

Now, at last, he had her full attention. "Don't leave me!" she cried. "No!"

"But I must," he told her. "Don't you smell the Shrove cakes? I must fetch them if we are to eat them—"

"I will have none of them," she told him, sternly prodding down her hunger, "if you must leave me."

He stood frowning, on the threshold. What could he do? A year or two younger, and he would have treated her frankly like a baby; a year or two older, her own reticence would have been her curb. But as it was—

"But all the world must have its Shrove cakes! How else will our good Wimple use her fat before Lent?" he demanded. "Have you never heard the pancake bell? And seen how the streets are filled with folk on the instant?"

She wriggled her toes ecstatically under the covers. The pancake bell! She had heard it last Shrovetide, but the same dull lady who would have frowned so vastly on her climbing trees had sternly forbidden her to touch the succulent dainties, hawked through the streets so merrily for more fortunate commoners.

"Have you a pancake bell?" she demanded, torn between two desires of the flesh.

"No bell," Gerald admitted, "but I have the cakes for the fetching!"

"No. Clap your hands—and your gentleman will fetch them."

Gerald smiled. "My gentleman is sleeping—or hunting—or feasting—"

She looked shocked. "That was Baal," she rebuked him. "I know, because Archbishop Laud told me all about him not two days past. Baal was eating or hunting or sleeping, and so all his Priests were devoured by fire, as should be all

the enemies of—" she checked herself quickly, eyes sidewise testing his abrupt concentration. "If you are so driven by hunger why do you not fetch the cakes?" she asked, with one of the diplomatic sidesteps in which she was already skilled.

"At once," Gerald said, and turned to the door. But something held him: the memory of the boy rescued from Billingsgate, only to gain a bloody poll in Buckinghamshire. "Let's have no more talk of burning folk," he said. "'Tis poor sauce for the appetite, with the season of repentance at hand."

"Oh, but you do not understand! They were wicked heretics, and God Himself destroyed them, showing that it is better for such to burn on earth than for those they mislead to burn in Hell!" She drew a long breath. "It is not for us to question the Will of God, and that there might be no confusion in the matter, He did it with His own lightning!"

Gerald frowned. This proceeding on the part of Deity seemed to him peculiarly un-English, and its interpretation smacked sourly of the Star Chamber, but he realized he was on quicksand, and that nothing was to be gained by remaining there.

"Such matters are best left to the Almighty, Who has the lightning ready to hand for them. The stake is a poor substitute, at best."

"But—" she stopped, startled.

Ajax stood in the doorway, his face dark as the clouds from which lightning comes.

Gerald said quickly, "We were discussing the feasibility of burning heretics, and are agreed the matter lies in the province of Almighty God."

"You were agreed," Ajax corrected. His eyes blazed, level and unfaltering. Vane's talk was still ringing in his ears, and like an echo he had heard this Laud-instructed child approving the burning of "wicked heretics." The surging

anger that had flung the Barons to Runnymede possessed him. His low voice shook. "Heretics, by God! Are we to be flung back to Bloody Mary? Where did you hear this, Madam? I have heard much of late, and believed little. But now, I would know: Is this the devil-bane they brew at Lambeth?"

V

MARY DID not answer.

The sound of hooves, of wheels, of a posthorn and voices and running, and the great nail-studded front door of Stacys Holding, creaking portentously on long unused hinges, prevented that. And Gerald's fist in his brother's side, as he hurried to the window, kept Ajax from pressing the question. Yet even the thing they now saw could not thrust it from the brothers' minds. And that was strange, for from the coach that had paused, a lady was even now descending.

All they could see, from above, was the angle of a slender and supple body, thrust forward, and the flash of hair, bright as Queen Bess's, beneath a flaring plumed and buckled hat. But they sufficed. She was young, at any rate, not some scrawny, droop-mouthed beldame, with a twisted sense of duty even the Stacy flattery might not straighten out. A great lady, too, from the jewels blazing on the glove she rested for the barest instant on the fortunate arm of an equerry. And a pretty lady, God grant.

Following her, William Harvey appeared. And behind him, two gentlemen, with stares and nods at the house punctuating their whispers. And as all these started up the steps, another coach rounded the drive and disgorged a middle-aged woman, whose attire proclaimed her a maid, and two giggling young things, burdened down with so many bandboxes and bundles their faces were quite invisible. Gerald sighed and made his brother a small, stiff bow.

"You are the elder," he said, "so the greeting's yours. For the night—"

"I'll match you," Ajax agreed instantly, and hurried off,

aware this was no matter to bungle or treat lightly. But his eyes were still troubled.

Gerald turned back to the child. "Your people are here," he told her and, flushing darkly, added for Ajax's sake the words torture could not have forced from him, for his own. "I beg that you will give a good account of us."

She put out her hand impulsively and, catching his, pressed it to her face. Her lips trembled, and two great tears overflowed.

"I love you," she choked. "Why must I go away? I love you so. You aren't angry now, are you? You love me, too, don't you?"

"Of course," he muttered, embarrassed by the worship in the childish eyes. "Let me go. They are here. You don't want them to see."

But she clung the tighter, and the best Gerald could achieve was an awkward, one-sided sort of bow, as the lady entered, followed by Harvey and Ajax.

The physician's eyes went immediately to the Princess, but the lady's laughed at Gerald. He discovered that his prayer had been answered: she was pretty; very pretty, indeed. It was not even too painful to have her mock his plight, for when she laughed, small lights danced and sparkled bewitchingly in her red-brown eyes. But now, having waited for some sort of introduction from Dr. Harvey, and realizing at last that he was too interested in his patient to be aware of social amenities, she curtsied gravely, and said:

"I am here in Lady Roxburghe's stead. She is prostrated—but completely prostrated—by all this. You are the other Master Stacy I take it."

Gerald admitted it, and achieved a more satisfactory bow, having freed his hand. "I regret the Countess is indisposed," he murmured politely, "though I cannot regret the necessity for so lovely a substitute."

Harvey looked up. "We shall be able to move Her Royal

Highness sooner than I first dared hope. Possibly, in a day or two." He glanced from Gerald to the girl. "Oh," he said, "This is Lady Charlotte Ponsonby, her lady. She will remain here, in attendance, together with an equerry and a nurse. I must return at once to London, to make a full report. I am happy to say that everything seems quite satisfactory."

"Quite," agreed Gerald, looking at Lady Charlotte.

"You will, I am sure, be rewarded for your trouble."

"I trust so."

"Eh? Oh, ah— Yes; to be sure. It will not be too long."

"It cannot be too long," said Gerald, gravely.

Harvey frowned. There was something very odd about the young gentleman's replies, but he had not the time nor the inclination to fret over that. He had enough on his hands, in a forthcoming effort to smooth over a great many difficulties for several people. After all, the child was not hurt seriously; she had been well cared for; and to his mind, everything considered, the less fuss there was, the better. He turned to Charlotte.

"If I can serve you in any way—"

"Thank you," said Charlotte, dropping her eyes and making a small curtsy. "I am quite positive I shall be well served. I would not for worlds delay your return."

There was something queer about that, too, Harvey thought; suspecting how the lady had pouted and lamented, when she was chosen to remain "in the very wilds," in attendance on a child; but again, he dismissed the notion with the reflection that women were always variable.

The next moment, Gerald was sharing his thought.

"We will all return—at once," said Mary. Her small face was set, her eyes bright. "At once," she repeated, as the others stared.

"That," frowned Harvey, "is impossible—"

"Your Royal Highness's condition—" murmured Charlotte.

"You distinctly told me, not a quarter hour past, that

you wanted to stay—" Gerald stopped. The small face was an anguished red; and he felt a pang of real repentance, for her hurt. Stooping impulsively, he touched her hand with his lips. "Mary— Forgive me—"

Lady Charlotte's raised brows were her only comment, at the time; but an hour later, when Harvey was gone, and the child asleep with Dolly Wimple and her nurse gossiping in the small anteroom to her bedchamber; when the great fire had been lit, and she and the Stacy men sat before it, she said suddenly:

"I fear you are a sad philanderer, Master Stacy."

Gerald and Ajax both looked up, each ready with an accustomed disclaimer. She laughed.

"Faith, I see I have not half plumbed the natural resources of Buckinghamshire," she teased.

"They await your will," said Ajax, but his glibness lacked the enthusiasm he would normally have felt. Since his question to Mary—rather, since his talk with Vane—there had been a heaviness upon him, ill-fitting him for the service of a lady.

Gerald, however, had flung off the momentary prescience he had felt. The little Princess was too fond of him to hurt him; he was sure of it; and before she left Stacys Holding, he would drop another word in that small ear. Certainly, tonight was ripening too sweetly for him to waste a thought on green tomorrows.

If Charlotte had been lovely in her green traveling gown, she was incredible in the flame velvet she now wore. The full, plain skirt gathered into the tight, long bodice, which emphasized the small waist and rounded breasts. Gerald could not force his eyes from them, gleaming in the candle-light like polished ivory, changing highlight and shadow with every breath. Once, she glanced up and intercepted his look, and dropped her lids quickly, but he held his gaze steady, until hers was forced to it again, so that she blushed and smiled tremulously—though both reactions, he realized,

had been perfected through much practice, a fact which in itself gratified him. "A day or two," Harvey had said, which presupposed a night or two, at best. There was small time to waste on formalities.

He caught Ajax's eye, and flicked a glance at the door. It was a signal long agreed between them, should either be too intrigued to settle the matter amicably with a tossed coin. Ajax rose, and bowed.

"There are matters demanding my attention," he sighed, "so I fear I must leave you. Unless you will assist me, and choose between a pair of cocks?"

"Ah, God forbid!" cried Lady Charlotte. "I am notoriously bad at choosing!" Her hand trailed, as if by chance, over the round dozen of bows fastening her bodice, and Gerald wondered whether it were possible that all twelve of the lovers they immortalized had been failures. It seemed almost too much to hope. Charlotte intercepted his glance, blushed expertly, and turned again to Ajax. "Do not let me detain you, Sir."

Ajax bowed. "Your Ladyship's servant."

"A quiet night to you," murmured Charlotte, politely.

Ajax's lips twitched. "And a pleasant one to you." He turned to Gerald with great innocence. "I am sure that you stand ready to fulfill Lady Charlotte's requirements, in my absence."

"And her desires, by Heaven's grace," said Gerald.

Everyone now bowed again, with great formality, and Ajax, making a final leg at the door, withdrew.

"I had no notion I should find such courtliness so far from London," Charlotte murmured. "How very fortunate that Her Royal Highness chose you, as her rescuer!"

"I assure you it is a circumstance for which I am increasingly grateful."

Charlotte allowed her glance to meet his. "I trust you will not regret your hospitality, Sir."

"I am sure I shall not," Gerald said firmly, and crossed

to her side. "Shall we go up, and determine the latest turn of the matter?"

"By all means," said Charlotte, and rose immediately.

He followed her up the stairs, close enough so that she might be aware of his nearness, far enough behind to appreciate the beauty of ankle and calf, precisely betrayed by the way she held her skirt.

At the door of the anteroom, they paused. Dolly Wimple, long versed in her role, looked up. Then she took the nurse firmly by the arm, and propelled her toward the hall, bobbing and mumbling her devoirs, as though she knew not what she was doing.

Gerald shut the hall door after them, and turned to Charlotte. For a long minute, he stood looking down at her, without speaking. At last her eyes dropped, and her breath caught, and her teeth prisoned her red lip. Then he stooped, and kissed the full arc of her breast, as he had wished and intended to do, all evening and, feeling her tremble at his touch, held her with one arm, while his other hand loosed all the twelve love knots, that his lips might exact their full, sweet toll.

Neither of them heard the small sound in the Princess' chamber, so neither of them guessed that, through the hours to come, a little girl lay weeping, lamenting her lost childhood.

VI

AT NOON next day, the Countess of Roxburghe arrived, miraculously recovered from her "prostration." She was scarcely out of her coach before she scented fresh trouble, having spent the night regretting her choice of Charlotte Ponsonby to attend upon the Princess, from the moment that Harvey reported to her that that lady seemed now to be reconciled to her duty. It was not that Charlotte's virtue was less than that of other ladies of fashion, but rather that her charms were greater, and so not to be overlooked by the young gentlemen whom Harvey had reported as her hosts. So Lady Roxburghe entered Stacys Holding with a greeting to Ajax and Gerald so cold it edged reproof, and a swift, uncontrollable glance at the bows on Charlotte's bodice which brooked no misinterpretation; but it was not until she saw Mary that her worst fears were realized.

Harvey had told her the child was well enough, but in all her experience Lady Roxburghe had seen no such change in so short a time. The little girl sat propped up among pillows, obviously uncomfortable, but not troubling to change. Her small, pale mouth was drooping, and when the Countess entered, she did not even raise her lowered eyes.

"God above!" cried Lady Roxburghe, "Whatever ails Your Royal Highness?"

She hurried to the bedside, and took one small listless hand in hers, and when Mary did not answer, hurried everyone out of the room. The poor lady was cold with terror, and even the impatience she had felt for the wilful whim that had caused everyone so much trouble had disappeared. She knelt beside the bed, but neither patience, tears, nor threats could gain any explanation from the child she had trained from infancy to parry questions inconvenient to

answer. She discovered only that Mary had eaten too many pancakes, and been treated with great courtesy by her hosts, though one objected to burning heretics in any fashion, and the other felt it should be done only with lightning.

"Good Gloriana!" cried Lady Roxburghe, aghast. "How came you to prate of heretics?"

"A good guest is never at a loss for conversation," Mary parroted her mentor, "and I doubt not, you will see at this moment that Lady Charlotte is conversing with our host, as they stroll in the garden below."

Lady Roxburghe rose, casting a keen look at the child. How she could hear Charlotte, so far away, Lady Roxburghe could not guess, but she had no doubt the light hint bore heavy meaning. Mary had been trained to guile by experts, who never forgot the child's importance in a game of empires. Within a short time, Mary must marry one or another of the princes who already sought her hand; and though for some years thereafter she would be only a jeweled and brocaded puppet in a foreign Court, her mere presence there must be of fruitful benefit to England. So Lady Roxburghe, staring from her window, sought the hidden meaning in the scene below.

Gerald and Charlotte were watching Tanker set out the clumsy figures for a game of Aunt Sally, and as the gay, bedraggled garments on them fell into place, Gerald tweaked a petticoat or reset a hood with a mock concern that set Charlotte's laughter ringing like a country hoyden's.

Even Lady Roxburghe could find no great evil in this, and was about to turn back, when Charlotte ran forward, and with almost hysterical mirth began tearing the small bows from her bodice, and setting them on the puppets, careless of the fact that as she did so, her own loosened garment fell away, until throat and neck lay bare, gleaming in the sun, like a Bacchante's. Only one bow remained at last, but even as Charlotte's fingers plucked at it, Gerald's hand closed over them.

What he said, Lady Roxburghe could not know, but she saw him take the jeweled buckle from his shoulder, and fasten Charlotte's gown quickly, and caught the girl's frightened, recalled glance toward the window, as they passed into the maze.

Lady Roxburghe turned from the window, her lips tight. Mary was propped on her elbow, all her listlessness gone.

"Well?" she demanded feverishly. "What did you see? What is happening?"

"Nothing," said the countess, and added quickly, "What did you expect me to see?"

Mary fell back among the pillows. Her eyes closed wearily. "You are sure?"

"Quite sure." She crossed to the bed, and stood looking down at the child uncertainly.

"He . . . did not kiss her?"

"Certainly not!"

A smile so sad it caught the older woman's heart touched Mary's lips. "He kissed *me*, before he knew I was . . . me."

Lady Roxburghe gasped. Any man who would make love to a child—and Mary, princess or not, was obviously only a child—could not be trusted with a Charlotte Ponsonby. She returned precipitately to the window, but Gerald and Charlotte had disappeared.

That settles it, Lady Roxburghe thought. *At this moment, they may be—*

But, as a matter of fact, they weren't. They weren't even kissing, though Gerald had suggested that they should, a number of times, naturally. They were standing a good three feet apart, in the main room, while Gerald poured a glass of port, and Charlotte repaired the damage she had so impulsively caused her gown.

"Oh, lackaday!" she exclaimed, tapping her foot impatiently. "I would I were not so featherbrained! I would—"

Gerald laughed. "There is only one thing *I* would, and this is no moment to reflect upon it. What cruel folly to

loose your bodice in broad daylight, with half England looking on!"

"Do you think *she* saw?"

"What if she did? This is no nunnery, nor is she the Lady Prioress.— You know, of course, I love you."

"Faith, that is greater folly than the other!"

"And you love me."

"The final folly of all!"

They laughed together softly, as he handed her her glass. "Thank God for the wisdom to make such charming fools as we are, then. And may He ever deliver us from the pitfalls of the prudent."

Her eyes laughed across the brim, as she drank. "Do you come to London often, Master Stacy?"

"I thought so, until last night. Now, I know how seldom once a fortnight is."

"La, you must not be greedy. There are other gentlemen, in London."

"And only one Lady Charlotte. God grant her strength, and me patience. Still, if I pleased you—"

"I am not easily pleased, Master Stacy." Her eyes teased him. "In France, they call me '*difficile*.'"

"Shall I tell you what *I* call you, in England?"

"La, no!" she cried softly. "It seems Lady Roxburghe is about to do so!"

Gerald turned, and saw the countess, very stiff and tight-lipped, on the second landing. Seeing she was observed, she descended slowly, her voice so bland that Charlotte shivered.

"I am sure you will be gratified to hear that Her Royal Highness is so improved we shall be leaving within the hour. Her greatest need now is a return to her accustomed surroundings."

"My one regret is that we have been unable to fulfill all her wants. Though I assure you that every effort has been made—"

"I am very sure of it," Lady Roxburghe interrupted, her

eyes direct. "Indeed, were *all* your efforts enumerated, the sum would doubtless amaze His Majesty. And I can well imagine Lady Charlotte's gratitude for your courtesies to *her*."

Gerald met her look squarely. *Old harriidan*, he thought. *She'd give her soul for Ponsonby's youth, and a night like that just past!* Aloud, he said, "Anything I may have done for Lady Charlotte has gratified me beyond expression. I only hope I may serve her as well again. I beg you to give the matter no further thought."

Lady Roxburghe flushed. The level, mocking eyes, the quiet voice, the almost slouching ease of the man before her made a sum of effrontery past her experience. "I assure you," she said, "such favors are not easily forgotten. Particularly, at Court." And she turned and swept up the stairs, Charlotte at heel like a chastened child.

Gerald waited, but she did not even glance back, and after a moment he shrugged and went to seek Ajax. But Ajax was nowhere to be found.

The company left, finally, without the elder Stacy's farewells, another episode, Gerald did not doubt, which the countess would not soon forget. Not that it mattered, really. He himself was glad to see them go, on any terms, and tilted his chair at a gayer angle, and laughed a bit louder, and drank a trifle deeper, to be free of them.

When Ajax returned, he found him clumsily pinning thirteen bows on the bodice of each of the Aunt Sally figures, while Tanker looked on, grinning.

Ajax said, "What I can't understand is how the thing happened."

Gerald cast him a rollicking side glance. "You should. Better than most," he assured him.

Ajax grunted. "I mean, the child's coming here, not—what you mean."

"How delicate we are become, of a sudden!" Gerald laughed. "What I mean is doubtless what you mean. Wit-

ness—the thirteenth bow.” He made a leg at each of the two puppets, and turned to face his brother. “As for the Princess, my own notion is garbled, being compiled from seven, seventeen, and seventy, and all of them female. According to Her Royal Highness, ‘something’ chased her, so she ‘climbed a tree.’ Lady Roxburghe adds the ‘something’ was herself. Though why so clever a bitch lost the scent, only Eros can say. It appears the whole party had been in Bath, while the old lady took the waters, though her present spleen is small recommendation for them, God knows. Mary wanted to go, and in a fit of softness, the King let her. They picked up Harvey there, and all went well until they left Slough, when some small accident occurred to the coach, and they stopped to repair it. At that, they all descended, to stretch their legs, and the fat was in the fire. Charlotte says the Princess, who had insisted on riding horseback and in the coach by turns, was out of sight on the instant, with the old lady billowing and bellowing after her. By the time the men joined the chase there was no sign of her, and with all the running about, no one could remember where she was last seen. At that, Lady Roxburghe was ‘prostrated,’ and was bundled back to London in the coach, while Harvey and an equerry and a pair of postillions began beating the woods, more than half convinced they were all mad. And at that moment, I entered the picture.”

“And she dropped in your arms, like a ripe apple.”

“She did not drop in my arms, and is by no means ripe. Indeed, had it not been for Lady Charlotte, the experience would have been barren enough.”

“But *with* Lady Charlotte—”

“Ah, there is a different matter. Sometime, when you are in London, it would repay you to seek her out. Thirteen is an ill-reputed number. And you would not have to feed this lady potatoes,” Gerald laughed, recalling his brother’s administration of the popular aphrodisiac to a mistress who had proven disappointing.

Ajax grinned good-naturedly. "So I surmised. Had I been in the mood I might have envied you."

"I half feared you would," Gerald flung an arm over his shoulder. "What if we ever did want the same wench, I wonder."

"We'd take her turn and turn about, as we used to ride the bay pony."

"But if we cared— If each desired her, for himself—"

They frowned over the unlikely problem. Then Ajax yawned. "We'd match for her, and the loser'd seek some other wench. No woman's worth a brother's enmity. As for your Charlotte—"

"Oh, there's no such question with that lady. She wouldn't permit herself to be owned, like a fine dog, or other domestic cattle. She as good as warned me I must plan my visits for Fridays, falling on an odd day of the month, and even then take a chance on finding her engaged. London, it appears, is cluttered with gentlemen, and she, being a poor weak woman, can oblige only the favored few. So the rest must pine."

Ajax laughed. "Thank God the prospect has not disturbed you. It's a bitter thing to grow gaunt, as Vane has, for a woman, or a cause. These yearnings and burnings, sending a sane man scampering over the globe like a zany—" he paused, shaking his head. "With England so fair, do you not wonder we English are so mad for roaming?"

"We always have been. There's always been England, yet her sons have always broken from her, to die in some jungle or desert, crying out for a bank of violets, or the honest scent of lavender." He flung himself into a chair, stretching his long legs luxuriously. "Thank God Gerald Stacy has more wit."

Ajax's hand was on his shoulder, its touch sober. "A pact, then: there will be no roaming for the Stacys, Gerald or Ajax. Thank God we're one in the matter. Life will be so damn pleasant, just the growing old here together."

VII

THE HEAT of late July lay like a veil over London, its dusty haze obscuring the grim line of the Tower, and shimmering in waves over the ancient bulk of St. Paul's and Westminster. The streets were empty of all who could remain indoors, so that the city presented a most squalid appearance, for while Drury Lane and the Strand were desolate the meaner sections swarmed with sweaty life, while the captains of the overcrowded river barges steered a troubled and circuitous course, cursing the naked townsfolk swarming around their bows, begging and diving for tossed coins, through the surface scum of swill and offal.

Only on the wharves, Paul's, Queenshyte, Black Fryers, Downgate, and the others stretched like mighty hands from the Port of London to grasp the treasures of the earth, was there any order in the vast confusion. There, the ships from Africa and the Indies, from China and the Western Colonies, unloaded cargoes past the dreams of Solomon: silk and chocolate, black slaves with salt rime and mold from their long imprisonment between decks frosting their wool, tea in magnificent scarlet lacquer chests, maize and tobacco, and nugget gold under the bristling guard of musketeers. Now and again, a housewife, tidier than her neighbors who contented themselves with gutters, dumped her household waste into the river, and immediately great flocks of white swans swept over the spot, screaming and flapping mighty wings, their clamor covering the clatter of wheels on cobbles as a last-moment consignment was rushed to a waiting ship, or the hoarse, insinuating laughter of a waterfront trollop, accommodating her customers in a half-concealed doorway.

Gerald had come from Stacys Holding that morning, in obedience to an invitation, which, from Charlotte, was

practically a command. What man in his senses would plead the heat as an excuse, knowing there awaited him one of Charlotte's famous swans, succulently roasted with precious herbs and Madeira wine, and tricked out with sugared ginger, and potatoes as sly libation to the rarer fare to follow? He had left his horse with James Farr, a barber who had lately started a Coffee House near the Inner Temple Gate, and stood in fair way to becoming famous for his masterly brewing of the precious bean which lately had taken fashionable London by storm. From there, Gerald had determined to walk to his rendezvous, since the morning was young, and Charlotte never visible until her dinner hour of eleven. He delighted in the waterfront sights at any time, and on a hot forenoon the fresh breeze from the river was added inducement. But today the tremendous power that lay under the surface activity was made more significant for him by Ajax's complaints of the night before.

Ajax had been increasingly troubled these past months by the King's yielding to Laud's schemes. Strafford had gained as great power as Buckingham had held, and even the broadsides scattered over England by malcontents had not warned the mighty triumverate that there was a strength in England beyond theirs, a voice even the Star Chamber could not silence. The grumbling grew, and the answering persecutions mounted, and looking at the Thames today Gerald recalled how James, in a fit of revenge against the wherry- and watermen who had defied a Royal order, had threatened to remove his Court from London. But the Mayor, instead of blenching at the ruin of the city which such action must cause, smiled coldly and calmly, and inquired whether His Majesty intended also to remove the river. Charles would do well, too, to remember that, Gerald thought. There was greater life within those banks than in the Royal veins. And the men who served the river knew it.

He went on, more slowly, thinking of these things, and turning a corner suddenly stopped midstep. The whole

square was blocked with a crowd so closely packed together the heat might have been a myth. What drew them, why they were by turns so silent and again raised a great shout, he could not see.

"What is it?" he asked a hard-muscled bully. "I've business beyond, and—"

The other turned, and Gerald was struck by the expression of the deep-set eyes. They gave the strange impression that the man had been sleeping, and had been suddenly awakened. "The martyr, Prynne," he said. "He's preaching from the pillory. And if you'll lend an ear, Sir, you'll see there's business here for all of us."

"Prynne? Who's Prynne? I never heard—"

"Hist!" grunted the man, and elbowed his way forward, urging Gerald with him, so that he could see the bearded head pendant from the raw bruised flesh that had been a throat, grating with every emphatic word against the wood that held it.

"God's final Name!" Gerald exclaimed, "His ears are lopped!"

"Aye, and they've branded him as well. Mark that face well, Sir. I'll wager you there's a scar on England for every one he bears. They will never silence him—not while he's a tongue to wag. And should they tear that out, as they've threatened, they'll find there's truth in Holy Writ beyond their ken, for the stones under their feet will break silence, and in a manner they do not expect."

Gerald glanced at him quickly. There was no mistaking his meaning. Yet why should he, or all these others, care so greatly whether a minister wore a surplice, or went black and mournful as a crow? The rest, the fundamental doctrines at stake, he knew very well they could not comprehend. But looking at them, he saw the truth of the matter in every out-thrust jaw and glittering eye: come what might, the People of England would allow no man to dictate their beliefs. While the peasants of the continent had been contented

enough with serfdom, if it yielded food and shelter, the free men of England had forced a King to their will, and from that hour had stood face to face with the God they served and worshiped. This that was happening was no new thing. It was the reaffirmation which had come every two or three centuries, that God was a Father to His people, and they would brook no hireling to interpret His will to them. That faith was the foundation of their liberty. While it remained inviolate, they would be free.

In this way, it was peculiarly English that the man on the pillory, even while serving a sentence for his defiance, yet was permitted to state his case to the people, so long as breath and will remained. He was telling of his imprisonment in the Tower, and Gerald managed to hear a few words:

" . . . for a Word has pierced those walls which will grow in volume and might until the walls themselves shall be flung down, even as the walls of Jericho before the shout of the Hosts of the LORD. And the idols set up by the proud in high places shall be tumbled in the dust, and the people of the LORD shall go forth clad in the garments of righteousness and sobriety. . . ."

At this, a great shout arose, and a number of people turned and looked at Gerald, making him uncomfortably aware of the extreme splendor of his attire. The immediate application of Master Prynne's preaching to his own plumes and laces seemed to him an anticlimax, unworthy of the occasion, but it was evident the crowd did not agree. Several urged him to put off the garments of folly, evidently without considering where such impulse would lead him, in broad daylight, in mid-London, and one or two even tried to assist him in the matter, pulling at his jeweled buckles, so that he was glad enough to get away. But for all his haste, and the growing distance between them, he could not put out of his mind the preacher's glowing eyes, set in that white and mutilated face.

Even when he reached Charlotte's, it took him some min-

utes to recall a mood proper to the occasion, though everything about her small and exquisite house had been designed for that express purpose. He crossed the parterres with bowed head, careless of the hedges with their gay, fantastic topiary animals which had always amused him; and failed to marvel at the little house, surrounded with perfectly scaled trees, so that the whole seemed a great estate seen through the wrong end of a sea glass. The entire place was perfect and stylized as Charlotte herself, and from orange trees to white peacocks had been as painstakingly collected as her love knots, whose adjunct, indeed, it was; and like Charlotte, they gave a man a sense of well-being, of his own importance, since he, and no other, was at this moment free of such meticulous perfection.

It was a feeling he had grown to cherish, as summer had ripened, a feeling most important of all, today, with the picture of Prynne to point his memory of Ajax's unrest. Yet he could recapture it only by making a deliberate effort, calling up to exorcise his troubled mind the cool and scented quiet of Charlotte's chamber, the ultimate rest insured by her pagan violence. But just as he had succeeded, the door flew open, and Charlotte herself, skirt caught up and red curls flying, came running toward him.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!"

"Surely, you knew I would. You had only to speak—" He had taken her in his arms, and frowned, feeling her tremble against him with passionless excitement.

"I wasn't sure. I am sure of nothing! Everything is changed, and even those I have trusted—" she drew away, as if she had said more than she intended, and searched his eyes. "Have you heard of Laud's latest venture? He has served notice on Scotland it must use his Book of Prayer, and already there are rumors—"

"What of it?" Gerald interrupted sharply. "What is that to us?"

"To us?" she echoed, wide-eyed. "Plenty, my poor zany, plenty! Holy St. Edward, you don't imagine I'm fool enough to fret over a prayer book, if the matter did *not* have some bearing on us! It has put the tailor's son in a foul mood, like any other peasant given great power, but thwarted in his whim. I tell you, if those Presbyterian zealots refuse him his will, he will lash left and right, and none of us will be spared." She paused, panting a little, eyes sidewise, testing him. "I should have told you," she went on, more slowly, "there was a great to-do, on our return from Stacys Holding."

"But that was months ago—"

"Canterbury is proud of boasting he thinks in centuries. The truth is, he's laid by a grudge against me, since the day he heard I had mocked his lineage. One or another gentleman has persuaded him to put it by, but if he fails in this, there's not a slight since he left his father's shop that he'll forget. He'll believe them all at bottom of his failure. And then—"

"Then, the walls will fall," Gerald repeated thoughtfully.

"Walls? What walls?"

"I am not sure. Possibly Lambeth. Or Westminster. Or even Whitehall."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. I was quoting—I know not what." He shook himself, and stooped quickly, to kiss her full, upturned mouth. "Thank God, we've a cure for such matters, within ourselves."

She nodded quickly, rubbing against him like an amorous cat, deliberately wooing her own passion, welcoming the caresses that fed it. Here—here, at least was rest, freedom for a little from doubt and turmoil. She had discovered the precious anodyne years back, almost before achieving her teens. God knew what she would do, when on some desperate future day she read in her mirror, or the eyes of a lover she desired, that she was too old to seize it at her will. She

shivered, putting the thought from her, and laughed, concealing behind glinting eyes the growing fear.

"Tell me," she coaxed, "have you in Buckinghamshire no convenient mousehole, for a most sleek and adaptable mouse to hide in, safe alike from the cat in cambric and the terriers in tartan?"

VIII

IT WAS after dusk when Gerald awakened, to see through the open door the candlelit, damask walls of Charlotte's dressing room, a jewel-box setting for her jewel-like beauty. On a loveseat, where he could see every curve of her supple body, Charlotte half reclined, but there was no feeling of repose about the two maids in attendance upon her. Rather, there was an undercurrent of almost feverish excitement and haste, in the way the girl who knelt before her adjusted the linen and lace underboot over her mistress' silk stocking, before slipping on the little shoe of Spanish leather, with its gemmed buckle and high scarlet heel. And on the other side, the second maid held a tray in hands that trembled, so that the tall chocolate pitcher of painted Venetian glass threatened to spill its fragrant contents. The whole picture, from the temptation of Charlotte to the obvious hurry that thwarted the desire it aroused, aggravated Gerald, and he spoke like a disappointed child.

"You promised me that before I returned—"

Charlotte waved her cup at him, for silence. "Hush, cry-baby. Half a loaf is better than none." She tried to speak lightly, but her voice shook. "I have just had news. I must go at once to Whitehall." He knew from her tone the news had been bad, and that she did not wish to speak further of it before the maids. "Put on the rail beside you and come have chocolate with me. This is a new shipment, brought me but yesterday by Sir John Suckling, and sweeter for the verses that wrapped it."

He felt she was talking against time, that she hardly knew what she said, and so made no show of jealousy over the rivalry of one of the most charming and gifted gentlemen who ever disturbed a lady's peace of mind.

As he drew the rich silk around his sweaty skin, grunting at the discomfort of even so light a covering on so hot an evening, he could not help wondering, nevertheless, which of Charlotte's lovers had left it, but a glance at her drawn face prevented his asking. She motioned him to her side, careless of the fact that she lacked rouge and powder, and that such nearness must betray every wrinkle, every imperfection so carefully concealed before. But, oddly, this increased his tenderness. He had had no idea how these past weeks had preyed on her. The sockets around her feverishly bright eyes were so deep and dark they needed no kohl to emphasize them, and her fine cheekbones and chin stretched the pale skin to translucency.

She signaled the maid to give him one of the tall handleless cups and then leaned toward him, speaking into his ear in a rushed monotone.

"They've rejected it. In Edinburgh, not a syllable could be heard for the jeers, though it was in the Cathedral itself." She paused, a catch of hysterical laughter in her words. "Some madwoman threw her stool at the Dean, and caught his ear, so that the intoning ended in a howl not written in by Canterbury." She rose for the maid to slip a chemise over her head. Through its folds, Gerald caught a muffled titter. "God grant us all as good aim, should we need it!"

Gerald set down his cup. "Wait. I'll go over with you."

She had shaken the chemise into place now, and the maid was busy fastening it. Over her head, Charlotte's eyes met his clearly. They were startled, touched. "It may not be politic," she warned him softly.

He had not thought of that, but at the suggestion he flung up his head. "What do you think I am—a Wentworth?"

The quick fright in her face warned him that with two maids in hearing one must not slur Charles's favorite. "Come if you will, then. But make haste."

His mind tumultuous, he rushed into his clothes. They crossed the terraces quickly, almost ran through the humid

dark streets. At the gate of the palace she laid her hand on his arm lightly, then, without a word, hurried between the guards, and disappeared.

Gerald turned away, frowning. Something in her gesture dismayed him. More than once during the past months, he had wondered whether she could be falling in love with him, but the reflection that she had greater names and larger fortunes in her train had always reassured him. But today, there had been something indefinable— He shook his shoulders testily, as if to free them of a weight, reflecting that the heat and the nervous strain of the past weeks might be at the root of it.

He had been walking slowly, circling the palace grounds, undecided whether to stay the night in London or return to Stacys Holding. On the one side, he disliked the trip by night, for it was made perilous not alone by highwaymen, but by the roads themselves, which were deeply rutted, and filled in with loose pebbles, so that the recent tumultuous thunderstorms had left them well-nigh treacherous as quicksand. On the other hand, there was a hunger for Stacys Holding, for its cool, high-ceilinged rooms, its sweet air—and, yes he admitted it—the door of mighty oak, with its triple lock and great bar. These things, he knew, could never stand against Laud's displeasure, but he felt a childish comfort in them, after Charlotte's warnings. Yet why should he? He had done nothing to merit Lambeth's ill favor. The Star Chamber was not for such as Gerald Stacy, a freeborn Englishman, who asked only the right to go his own carefree way, until at last he reached the little Chapel at Stacys Holding, where his ancestors lay, dog or lion at feet, Crusader's Cross or carven Order on their once restless breasts.

He had almost decided to return when the sound of harsh, muffled weeping stopped him. There was no one in sight, but the heartbreak in the bodiless sound was so great he could not go on, without discovering its cause. At his elbow, a rosebush was espaliered against the wall. It cascaded out

over the street with its late summer growth, and even as he cursed himself for a sentimental fool, he bent and looked under it. All he distinguished at first in the darkness was a figure curled like a snail among the leaves. It might have been a child's but for the man's voice, and the gray pointed beard and mustache, suddenly visible as it raised its head.

"God's final Name!" cried Gerald, putting out his hand and withdrawing it sticky with blood. For a second, he thought it was his own, thorn-drawn, then cried out, shocked to realization, "Who has done this to you?"

"A woman," the old man answered, and his strange face twisted. "Now tell me, noble sir, if it does not seem strange that a woman throwing her stool in Edinburgh should strike me here, and that by some waspish magic the stool itself should turn so swiftly to a lash?"

"Christ's mercy!" Gerald cried, and something in the old man's tone and way of speaking hushed his words. "Who are you?"

"Your question betrays your knowledge of the answer, Sir."

"But— No. It's impossible. You can't be! The King's Jester—come to this pass?" He jerked upright. "The King shall hear of this!"

"Hist, Master, hist!" The thin fingers plucked at his boot. "Draw near, and I will tell you why I weep. 'Tis not for my wounds, nor the bitter alchemy that has made Merrie England so sad a place. But this: The King is dead."

"The King—" Gerald was too shocked to finish, but suddenly remembered the old man had been Fool to James, as well. "Poor soul, your trouble has addled your wits. James is dead, true. But Charles—"

"Charles lives. The King is dead." The old man put a finger to the side of his nose, suppressing the cry caused by his sudden gesture. "Riddle my riddle, Sir, and you will see as clear as I. And as for addling my wits, my mother did it ere my birth. and that is why in an addled age I alone

see true. I tell you, the King is dead. This you see is not my blood. Kneel down, Sir, and put off your shoes, and cover your eyes, for in this hour the lash drew Stuart blood."

Poor unbalanced wit! Gerald thought. *He poised so long upon the brink of folly, this has toppled him into the very slough of madness.* Still he stared at him, irresolute, shaking his head, incredulous. No one, no one in all England, no one in the whole civilized world, would punish a Jester for his quip. Since the dawn of history, Fools had rebuked Kings, and gone unrebuked, themselves. He said softly, "Poor nimblewit, can you tell me what happened?"

"Aye, Master—I will tell you—but only lopped ears can rightly hear me." The wizened face twisted, and the old eyes peered up at him with a wisdom as unsettling as it was unsettled. "The throne of wisdom is the pillory, Master, and the brightest eyes are those plucked out. But listen, and you may hear the wind in the willows, and draw your cloak the closer for succoring folly. I asked a question, Master. A question of the Church, God wot, the very coffer of meaty answers, since time began. And for that, I had my answer, and no denying it. But it was neither the one that I expected, nor that William Canterbury planned. I whispered my question softly, Master, but what an echo swelled therefrom: It is still riding the wind, and if you pull aside your pretty curls, you may yet hear it, to your good, Master."

"I have not yet heard the question."

"Aye, aye. The question. Ah, well-a-day. The news came running down from Edinburgh of the warm welcome given by our cold neighbors to the Primate's editing of the Word. And, having had some inkling before Lawn Sleeves of this matter, I did but ask him, Who is now the Fool?"

"And then, poor Fool?"

"Then he replied. The reply he ordered, Master, was twenty lashes. But the reply I heard was, The King is dead."

Gerald did not answer. There was more here than lay within the labored words, but he had no time now for un-

raveling it. At any moment, one of the guards might find him, aiding a man in disfavor. He had no will to face Laud on this matter, though he knew in a breath that if he did, his answer would be England's. Charlotte had warned, "It may not be politic." He had thrust the warning aside, through chivalry, through common decency. Succoring Archy Armstrong, he knew that to be politic was to be a coward. If this warped brain, in a poor twisted body, could defy the might of Canterbury, the hour had come when Gerald Stacy had weightier business than adding love knots to a lady's bodice.

He slipped his hands beneath the old man's armpits. "Come, Fool," he said. "I think I have heard 'the answer, riding the wind.'"

IX

JOHN SUCKLING flung an elegant calf over the arm of his chair, and waved his pipe at Vane and Ajax, emphasizing his argument.

"You both know my small liking for Wentworth, though God knows he has made a broad effort to bring us all to heel, having so hotly at one time or another agreed with all parties. But there is an odor to him—"

Vane flicked a kerchief across his arched nostrils. "In that at least we are agreed. To honest men, a turncoat outstinks Fleet Ditch."

"Precisely. Still— Even admitting he curdles my sop in passing, there is something to back his stand in the latest matter."

"You are conservative, my dear John," Ajax murmured. "To Vane and myself, thumbscrew and rack seem rather more than 'something.'"

He turned, his lip curling, and poured wine in the three waiting goblets. Could it be that John Suckling, their old friend, with whom they had whiled away many a winter's evening at his excellent game of cribbage, would not see the truth of so simple a matter? Unless they all stood together, loyal gentlemen and friends of King Charles, against the sly and sycophantic upstarts who had pilfered the Royal favor and attention, God knew what the outcome would be. He said slowly, "Tell me how far you are prepared to go in this matter."

Suckling rose. "It was for that I came. I am prepared to raise and equip at my own expense a regiment to fight the Northern rebels, should it prove necessary. I came to invite you and Vane and Gerald to join it."

"A regiment!" Ajax exclaimed. It seemed incredible that England and Scotland would fight over a prayer book. Yet

was it only a prayer book? Was it not a principle—the same principle that had flung Drake's ships in the path of the Armada, and sent Cranmer and Latimer and Ridley, upright and rejoicing, to the pyre? He said slowly, "It is the first tenet of our English liberty that a man shall worship his God as seems to him most fitting. I would be loath to draw sword against any man for such practice."

"It is more clearly the Will of God that a rebellious people shall not defy the judgment of their anointed King!" Suckling flared. "And wherein lies the kernel of all this todo and pother? What has been asked, but that God's house shall be adorned with beauty, and His worship attended with dignity and honor? For my part, I can say it seems no more than fitting to return to the Almighty some small part of the richness vouchsafed to us by Him."

"If that were all," Vane said temperately, "none of us would object. But many of us dread the pyre behind the cope, and the oppressive taxing of the poor to adorn an image. You yourself know what it has cost our people to restore Paul's, and the work is not completed, nor will be these many years, though a dozen times the necessary sum has been wrung from the people, to melt in the pockets of Laud's favorites."

"That is a matter of which I know little. I can only say that Paul's and Oxford College will remain when you and I are forgotten, and that there is somewhere a strict admonition to 'lay not up your treasure where moth and rust may corrupt.' For the rest, it is clearly our duty to repress a rebellious people, rising to defy its divinely chosen King."

"But such persuasion as you suggest may well tip the scale the wrong way," Vane said. He, too, had risen, and seemed very tall in his somber elegance of black velvet. "And I for one would hesitate to cast my lot with Wentworth. I have not forgot Pym's farewell: 'Leave us if you will, but we shall not leave you while your head remains upon your shoulders.'"

Suckling laughed. "Nor do I forget that Sir Thomas

Wentworth was a far humbler adversary than the Earl of Strafford."

"It is a pity, that his imagination has not grown with his fame. A pike served to coerce Ireland, and a pike will do for the Scots." Vane raised his glass, his eyes flashing. "Let us drink while we may, then, in friendship, for if he persists in the matter, we may yet be forced to face each other across lances."

"Oh, it won't come to that," Suckling evaded. "A threat will suffice. That's all he intends."

Ajax set down his glass. "The danger is, can he—or Laud, or the King himself—stop an avalanche in its course? Once the first few pebbles are shifted from their accustomed place—God help us all."

Suckling stared. "I'd no idea you'd take the matter so seriously."

"I've been thinking. And talking to Gerald. He is greatly disturbed."

"I heard he plucked old Archy from a rosebush," Suckling smiled. "What an extraordinary penchant he has for fruit-garnering in odd places!"

Ajax frowned. He had had no idea Gerald's exploits were so widely known. Suckling was chuckling, his good humor returned.

"Her Royal Highness sulked for days, for pancakes and his *beaux yeux*, and made such a wry face at the French Ambassador he reported to his master she had a cast in her eye."

"There was nothing wrong with her eyes I could see," Ajax said uncomfortably. "They were bright as any I ever saw."

"Too bright, from the rumors," Suckling nudged him gaily. "Lady Charlotte would not too greatly have regretted it had she been blind. Heigho, you'll have me sputtering treason like the rest of you, before I'm done." He rose, and flung a riding cape across his shoulders, fastening the jeweled buckle with a flourish. "Coming, Vane?"

Vane nodded. "I must return to Raby. My father is greatly troubled."

Suckling looked at him quickly. The elder Vane was no hothead, like his son. He bade Ajax farewell as gaily as ever, but wondered, as he mounted, whether he would ride soon again to Stacys Holding.

Ajax, who had gone with them to the terrace, wondered, too, as he watched them ride away. He returned indoors hardly a minute before Gerald arrived, laughing and calling the dogs that rushed to greet him. When he entered, they jumped around him, and he seemed happier than he had in weeks. He saw the three glasses, and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Vane and Suckling," Ajax told him. "They're hardly gone."

"God bless us, what a pottage! You must have been hard put to it to keep it from scorching!"

"On the contrary. It's a pity you weren't back earlier."

"I was at the greyhound-coursing, and left before it was over, as it was. I thought you'd be half ready."

"Ready?"

"You haven't forgotten the ball!"

Ajax had forgotten. After all, a ball of Charlotte's was not his most intimate concern. But something in Gerald's expression held him.

"I'll go," he said, and was amazed at the light of real relief in Gerald's eyes. Hesitating at the foot of the stairs, he almost asked why it was so necessary for him to go, and if he had it would have changed his whole life; but some reticence between them, which through all their intimacy had restrained them from prying into each other's thoughts, kept him silent. And Gerald, who had been on the verge of telling him of his own will, decided it was better to let matters move as they would, with at least a show of casualness.

After all, in the natural course of events, once Ajax saw

Charlotte in her perfect house, the exquisite hostess among her admirers, it was possible he would desire her of his own accord. Hadn't he said, that first night at Stacys Holding, that he had envied Gerald? What more natural, then, than that he should find his desire whetted by the weeks of abstinence between? For Ajax had not had a woman since, and that was unnatural at any time, but alarming in the spring and summer.

It had been less than half a year since Her Royal Highness had come to Stacys Holding, and the event had later been marked only by a brief expression of Royal gratitude for hospitality tendered to the Princess; but from that hour, everything was changed, so that it seemed hard to recall a time when he and Ajax, inseparable and carefree as healthy animals, had divided their lives and attention between the pleasures of the hunt, the table, and the bed. Now Ajax rode too often alone, to return with knotted forehead and clipped speech, his stormy eyes set on matters beyond Gerald's ken. Even had it not been opportune to urge Charlotte upon him, Gerald would have felt his need was a woman. True, he himself had had no resident mistress since the ungrateful Matilda, but that had been due at first to Charlotte's talents, and recently—ah, recently!—to Clarissa.

Some day he would marry Clarissa. He did not question how this was to be accomplished. He only knew that it was so.

He had known it from the hour when he first saw her. It had been the day following his encounter with Prynne and Archy Armstrong. He had stayed in London for the night, for it had been late when he left the Fool, his wounds washed and his wits dulled with wine, but the day's tumult had increased his own restlessness. After hours of nervous agitation, reading a little, drinking a little, casting himself on his bed only to jump up and recommence his jerky pacing, he had abandoned all hope of calm, and had dressed

and slipped into the dawn. Normally, he would have sought a woman, but a brothel was too confused a place, and Charlotte, even if returned from Whitehall, was too inextricably mixed up in the previous day's unrest to promise peace.

He began to walk without intention through the unexpectedly cool streets, finding them sweet and damp after the night's storm, and so found himself at last on the outskirts of the city, in a section he did not know.

Around a small crescent of flowers, washed clean by the rain, clustered a score of little houses, whose charm and good taste delighted him. They even achieved a certain dignity, and this, combined with the crisp, pert maids scrubbing already immaculate doorsteps, or giggling across neat railings with respectably liveried menservants, proclaimed them the homes of gentlepeople, who, though of limited means, might claim some social standing.

As he loitered, one of the doors popped open, and the pertest and crispest maid of all appeared, bobbing and smiling, as she held the door for her mistress. The lady who now stepped into the early morning light was so pale, so exquisitely small and slender, that Gerald thought she was a child until she stooped by the roses, and the womanly curve of her breast under her gathered bodice, and rounded hip and thigh beneath the plain full skirt, were betrayed. Yet there remained a flavor of refreshing innocence about her, with her naturally wavy pale hair, bound only by a Madonna blue snood, stirring in the early breeze. As she moved among her flowers, directing her maid in their culling, he noted that she wore no jewels, though other ladies did, whatever the hour or occupation. Yet surely, a dozen gentlemen would have delighted to adorn so lovely a mistress, and one whose every nod and gesture proved her adept in society, and aware of her own power.

He was so intrigued by the whole situation that, without

knowing what he did, he crossed the street, and stood staring as boldly as though he were invisible, instead of being actually the most conspicuous figure in the crescent, with his sturdy six feet of elegance topped by the inevitable golden feather. Yet the lady did not seem to see him. She slipped gracefully from flower to flower, even pausing to consult the sundial, and shake her head as if the passing moments threatened her as bitterly as they did her less fortunate sisters.

At this point, he was so overcome that he caught her railing with white-knuckled hands, and either the gesture or the intensity of his look pierced her maidenly abstraction. She looked up, and in her eyes he discovered the color of a perfected heaven.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Oh! Pray, Sir, what is it?"

He was aware then how wildly he had been staring, how he had clung to her fence as the very outpost of salvation. He was only thankful that the pert maid, with a sidewise curtsy, and quick, lash-veiled glance, had hurried indoors.

"I wanted—" It was useless. How could he tell her he wanted to kneel at her feet, to feel her hand like a benediction on his head, to know he was liberated from all the sins he had ever committed or imagined?

"Well?" Her voice made the monosyllable the chirp of a small garden bird, shaming the showy songsters with its purity.

"Will you give me one of your roses?" he asked, far more humbly than he had demanded the ultimate favor of a dozen other women.

He could hardly credit it when she laughed at his daring. "Is that all you want? Here—and here—" She stripped the bushes, her small face flushed with eagerness and exertion.

"Don't!" he exclaimed, and as she put them in his hands, touching his arm as if accidentally, "God, how can I pay so great a debt?"

He was looking over the flowers into her eyes, and some-

thing in his look must have startled her. She stepped back quickly, and the fresh color rushed from her throat over her face and lowered lids and wide low forehead.

"Please," she said, suddenly self-conscious. "What are a few roses?"

"Shall I tell you? May I come in and tell you?"

She nodded, looking up quickly as he unlatched the gate. But when he stood at her side, his dreams had outstripped the moment, so that he could think of nothing appropriate to say, and dared not say what he was thinking.

"I'll go now," he said sharply.

"Go? Go! But why?"

He dared not credit the regret he detected under her amazement. If he had, he must have returned, and by a mighty effort of will, he was already outside, the gate safe between them. Yet some explanation he must make, or free the tears already in the guileless eyes. "I am going, because I wish so greatly to return," he admitted.

He was gone with his words, and did not look back, though he knew she must be staring after him as at an inmate of Bedlam.

So he had returned to Stacys Holding with an armful of faded roses, and the knowledge he could love a woman.

X

FROM THAT hour, Gerald wondered how he could free himself of Charlotte. Before his encounter with Clarissa, when there was no real reason for it, it would have been simple enough. He would have stopped seeing her, as he had a dozen other mistresses, knowing she was 'enough woman of the world to accept his defection as philosophically as he would have accepted her acquisition of another love knot. But now that he had seen Clarissa, the growing inconvenient suspicion that Charlotte might have grown to love him, made him gentle. So he hoped that Ajax might desire her, his facile fancy caught by some hitherto unnoticed grace. Ajax's approach would cover his own retreat. More than one lady had told him his brother was a cleverer lover than he, and for the rest, they were well matched. So Charlotte would forget him, naturally, where she never would have forgotten a wound to her pride.

In the meantime, that Charlotte might suspect nothing, he had allowed himself only one brief visit to Clarissa, a formal, chill call, ostensibly a gesture of gratitude for the roses. All through the hour she granted him he felt like a hypocrite, struggling to efface from her memory the wild youth who had rushed upon her out of the dawn, and fled back into it, driven by his own tumultuous desire. Surely, she must guess that was his real self, not this curled, brocaded exquisite, laying conventional siege to her with flowery platitudes! But if she did, neither her polite gentle speech nor the unclouded gaze of her blue eyes betrayed her suspicion. And he had gained a knowledge of her name—and the promise of seeing her again. She was going to Charlotte's.

For the first time he was glad Charlotte was giving her ball. The whisper was that she had planned it hastily, as an open

gesture of defiance—or reassurance, if matters were not actually so serious as rumor made them. Not even her lovers knew the truth, but Gerald, seated in the family coach beside Ajax, hoped for his own sake she was still in favor.

The hope was short-lived. A glance at the company that had assembled sufficed. Her last ball had drawn a company gayer than that at Whitehall, and almost as brilliant. At this one, there was no member of the Royal household, and though Charlotte's admirers, past and present, still crowded her rooms, they had to content themselves for the most part with ladies of the *demimonde*.

But Clarissa was there. With a great surge of gratitude, Gerald discovered her, talking with childlike gaiety to a group of gentlemen ranging from a poet to a duke. They seemed to surround her, to hold her safe from the rouged and glittering ladies, whose bare bosoms belied their downcast eyes. Clarissa wore a gown of ivory grosgrain, unfashionably high in the bodice, with little waterfalls of cloudy convent lace. Her only ornament was a twist of turquoises around her slender throat, and in her hair she wore two small blue rosettes, gathering the curls above each temple.

Gerald caught Ajax's arm. "Come," he said, "This is why I wanted you to come."

For the moment, he really believed it. He wanted Ajax to know Clarissa, to rejoice with him, that at last he had found her. He had forgotten Charlotte, who was nowhere to be seen, in the wonder of rediscovering Clarissa. But almost at once Charlotte joined them. She greeted them with nervous, unconvincing gaiety, and her eyes met Gerald's with a poorly hidden challenge and reproach. She put out her hand, and he was aware it shook before her long fingers, curving spasmodically around his arm, steadied it.

"Clarissa! But, *ma mie*, how lovely you look! When I see you, I almost feel it pays to be virtuous!" She turned under cover of the laughter, and whispered to Gerald. The hurried

words, coming from her set, smiling lips, startled him. "I must talk to you. No. Not now—later."

She smiled around the circle, patted Clarissa's cheek, and was gone.

Gerald said, "My brother wants—that is, I want—"

Clarissa smiled. She had learned this was all she need do, which was fortunate, for she had better use for her agile wits than making conversation. She was an orphan, and dowerless. She knew this as well as she knew that she was beautiful, well-born, and, cleverly, virginal. Or that Stacy's Holding was one of the most desirable seats in Buckinghamshire, and the Stacy men notoriously susceptible. So she continued to smile, while Gerald stammered, and the other gentlemen strove for her attention.

After a while, she said, "Yes, Master Stacy? Your brother—?"

Gerald realized then that Ajax was not there. He had turned aside, and was talking to Suckling, and their faces were so serious Gerald imagined they were again at their politics, and wondered why they both looked at him.

As a matter of fact, Ajax had noticed Gerald's unease, and asked, "Who is the lady?"

Suckling's mouth kinked. "The Blessed Lady. Clarissa Brinton. As clever a minx as there is in London."

"Minx?" Ajax frowned. He could not imagine any minx troubling Gerald.

"The last virgin in London," Suckling said, "And God help the man who remedies it. He'll pay the bill of her chastity with his life."

"Good God, she wouldn't kill him! Not in this day and age!"

"Kill him? What for? No sensible cat kills a mouse. What good is it, out of its pretty, playful agony? Oh, no. She'd not kill him. She would keep him alive, allowing him small freedoms, that he might remember liberty, and attempt to escape, so whetting her desire."

Clarissa turned. She smiled. Ajax said quickly, "Look here, Suckling, you never happened to want her yourself, did you?"

"We all have. There's not a man in London but would give his eyes to boast that conquest. How else would we know she's virginal?"

Ajax grunted something, and rejoined Gerald, convinced Suckling was soured with jealousy.

Clarissa's smile was fading, now, leaving on her little heart-shaped face a tender wistfulness. No wonder they called her the Blessed Lady! Through a maze of wonder, Ajax knew Gerald was presenting him to her, felt the touch of her small white fingers, as he bent over her hand. Far from being possessed, as Suckling had hinted, he felt himself to be released, like men in medieval folk tales, released by the Virgin's intercession, from cruel enchantments.

Gerald, watching closely, was happy. He had wanted Ajax to like Clarissa. How else could he have brought her to Stacys Holding? He felt a great pride in her, as if they were already wed.

Charlotte was suddenly at his elbow. She touched his hand as she passed, without looking at him. It recalled him, with a sense of physical shock, to reality. He saw her pass through the garden door, and followed reluctantly.

It was too cold in the garden for aimless straying. The autumn wind had swept up from the river, a witch's tune for the dancing of the topiary creatures that bent and twisted to its rhythm. He called, "Charlotte! Charlottel!" but the hurrying shadow ahead took no notice.

At the very edge of the river, Charlotte stopped. A faint light came from the tall windows, and he could see that her fear had mastered her, now she was free of prying eyes. Her eyes shone, and her long hands clasped and unclasped until they looked like pale writhing reptiles, and her tongue darted at her dry lips, so that he shivered at the subconscious suggestion.

"Gerald— They— He has discovered about us."

"They? He?"

"Laud. I told you he hated me. God, how he hates me!"

"But why? He hates us all, of course. But why you, particularly?"

"Because he is a peasant, and I have dared remember it. So he'll spit me on his peasant's morals as he did Lady Porlock's lover. It's nothing to murder his enemies, for he can declare them enemies of the King. But what *we* did—" she paused, her white face upturned to his. "Gerald it was worth anything—wasn't it? Say it was worth anything to you, too. I made you happy."

He nodded, marveling that her voice, her nearness, no longer had the power to move him. "Yes. We were happy, together."

She clasped his arms, pressing against him. "We *are* happy together. That is what you meant, isn't it?"

He glanced down at her hands, not wanting to meet her eyes, and wondered that he had never noticed before how clawlike they were, with their overlong, overpolished nails. They dug into his flesh. He felt them, predatory and insistent, through his bright brocade sleeves, and realized suddenly that he did not like great strength in women.

He said, "But even if he has discovered about us, that can't make so great a difference," and he allowed his eyes to rest on the love knots. It was as if he had said, "What of the others? Are they less guilty?"

"It was all that brat—" she caught herself, glanced quickly around. "Her Royal Highness allowed a trifle to escape here, and another trifle there, until they had made of her prattle a whole structure of disrespect for the Royal person, and the Church, as well. How you and your precious brother scorn the Star Chamber, and would have England overrun with heretics, unless God saw fit to strike them all with lightning. And how you tore at my bodice, and delighted to take me, before a 'pure and Royal lady,' God wot! God, I can see her

straining at the bed curtains, to miss no fine point of our misdemeanor, the little spy! And may she live forever in the memory, knowing a great bitterness and discontent with the dutiful attentions of whichever Prince she marries, and never finding a lover to warm her!"

Gerald struggled not to laugh at this outburst, and asked quickly, "What would you have me do, then? If Laud's already so angry, do you think my taking you again will appease him?"

"Have you thought what a different face the matter would have if we were man and wife?"

"If— But, Charlotte—"

"Wait. Hear me through. The blow has not yet fallen. I have powerful friends, and they—interceded for me. They assured him we were about to wed. But— We must do it swiftly." She paused, her lips twisted in a sneer. "Even the 'pure Royal lady' cannot object to a gentleman bedding with his wife."

"But, Charlotte— You cannot know what you are saying. I am no suitable husband for one of the Princess's ladies. If you wed me—" he stopped before the thing in her eyes. It told him Charlotte would never again attend Her Royal Highness.

She said, "Are you so sure your fear is for *me*, my dear?"

"Fear!" he cried, the blood rushing to his face. "I am not afraid— Good God, it's not a matter of *fear*, it's—Charlotte, I shall always remember how beautiful you are, how—"

He did not finish. He could not. Nor was there any need. She stood very close, her eyes searching his, and when she spoke at last there was only contempt in her tone.

"Why, you— You little country farmer! How dare you speak so to me? Oh, God, God, that I should have lived—" She covered her face, and began to sob, wrenched and shaken by the tearing breaths, writhing under the humiliation as under physical anguish. Of a dozen lovers, she had chosen him, had humbled herself before him. She had been

so sure. No man had ever desired her so savagely, so that their passion fed, each on the other, until a month back—

Her hands fell from her eyes. Through her slowing tears she stared at him. She should have known that there was someone else. A month back, she could have had him for the flick of her finger. But now—now that her fortune had left her—No. No, it was not that. In justice she must admit that would have held small weight with him. He was not afraid. She knew it. But—Her face hardened. He would be. As there was a God in heaven, he would be. He would fear as she did, until at night her limbs could not move with the chill that rayed out from her heart. He was already out of favor, no longer a country gentleman, obscure enough to be anonymous. He was watched, now. And Laud's people would be well rewarded for their watching.

She bowed her head submissively, stifling the last slow sobs.

"Forgive me," she murmured. "I—loved you, my dear, and my vanity betrayed me into believing that you—loved me, also. But I would not have you wed me against your desire. You must forgive a poor frail lady for the tenderness she bore you, and think of me kindly, sometimes."

"Charlotte! Anything—anything you might ever ask of me—but that one thing. Anything—"

* For a second her hand rested on his breast, her face was raised to his, as if for one last time she would look long enough to bear his image forever in her heart. Then she was gone.

XI

AJAX RODE like a madman over the rutted roads, driven by exultation as wild as the wind that swept falling leaves across his face, or beat his body with snapped branches. He had slipped away from Charlotte's, and borrowed a horse, leaving the coach for Gerald, careless alike of his friends' wonder, and the inevitable ruin of his velvet suit and silken hose. What did they matter, what did anything matter, except the thing that had happened to him, leaving his full lips incredulous, his eyes blurred with wonder?

Clarissa. Clarissa lived. Clarissa was in the same world with him, at the one brief point of time when he himself lived. She had stood so close to him he could have put out his hand and clasped hers. God, what a fool he had been, what a blind profligate fool, not to know it always, not to feel it in every drop of blood, every drawn breath. Clarissa, his love, was alive! Later would come consecutive thought, plans. Tonight, the wind was driven, the earth spun, with the knowledge Clarissa was alive.

At the gate of Stacys Holding, he drew rein. A canniness, the cunning of a madman or a drunkard, stayed him. He must be very quiet. A light in the servants' quarters warned him Dolly Wimple was waiting up, as she had ever since Mistress Stacy's death, for her young gentlemen. He entered tiptoe; the scent of mulled wine, fragrant with roasted crabs, pronounced her hunched over her fire, their drinks prepared. He had always been grateful to Dolly, before. Tonight he felt he could not bear her bouncing gait, her wholesome laughter, her hearty questions, and sly rib-digging. Dolly would never understand that tonight was different from all other nights. Tonight had been set apart from eternity for his Vigil of Arms.

That was why he had eluded Gerald, and hurried home alone. All his life met in this hour. He knew, now, that when he was a child he had looked forward to it with confidence. Through the troubled nights of adolescence, he had clung to it. Only since he had come to full manhood had he doubted it, mocking it and reviling it, because in bitterness of soul he believed he had been mocked and cheated of it. So had he turned upon the very source of life.

Good God, he thought, *what if I had not gone tonight? What if Gerald had not made me go?* Gratitude surged through him, warming him after the chill thought. Gerald. Gerald had accomplished this. His brother, whom he loved.

He entered the house softly, draining every second of its sweetness. The hour was symbolic, a prophecy of the time when Clarissa, no longer a dream, but in the very flesh, would come to Stacys Holding.

"Clarissa," he whispered, closing his eyes and reaching out his arms, as he had years before, in boyhood, when the prophecy of Clarissa had been the beating of his blood, the disquiet in his waking and his dreams.

A month before, a day before, he would have scorned for a sentimental fool a man who thought so of a woman. Tonight, he walked through the well-known rooms with wonder in his eyes, his lips tender, picturing her there. He saw her seated in his mother's chair, her head well-framed by the Stacy arms, picked out in needlework, her fingers delicate among the yarns in his mother's crewel box; moving forward to greet a guest; on the broad staircase, light and lovely as a moon moth; and above—above— Passion swept him, leaving him shaken, helpless, imagining himself—above—with Clarissa.

He would have to be very gentle, at first. He would have to remember she was not like other women. Clarissa, the Blessed Lady, in her Madonna blue. He covered his face with his hands, and stood with bowed head, caught between passion and prayer.

Standing so, he heard the rumble of coach wheels. Gerald had returned.

With great effort, Ajax shook himself free of the spell he had invoked. He seemed to feel the wind between the spheres lift and eddy around him, with the swiftness of the change. Still, he dared not trust himself, yet, to Gerald's searching eyes. He stepped back into the shadow, struggling for control.

Suddenly, he was aware that Gerald was quiet, also. The younger man had closed the door as gently as he had opened it, and now stood as if listening, his back against it, his handsome head cocked. In the candlelight, his lips were incredulous, the brilliance of his eyes like a child's on Christmas morning. After a moment, he crossed to the main room, passing from Ajax's sight. Steeling himself, Ajax stepped from the shadow, and at that instant, Gerald reappeared.

"God's final Name! What are you doing here?"

"What are you?—Did you find the ball disappointing?"

Gerald shook his head, his curls emphatic. "No. I had to be alone. To think." He flung himself into a chair. "Have you ever thought what a see-saw life is? One up, and the other down, and the safety of each dependent on the other." He ran an impatient hand through his hair. "God, I'm tired. What brought you back without me?"

"I told you before I went that I had small mind to frivol. I'd have sent you word I was returning, but I feared it'd cut your pleasure short."

There was a new wariness between them, as if they were fencers, each weighing the weapon of the other's words. Once, Gerald opened his mouth, as if he were about to speak, but closed it again swiftly, his glance flicking Ajax, to see if he had noticed it.

"God's final Name, I'm empty," he exclaimed, obviously covering his indecision. "Hi, Wimple! Tanker! Do they

think we're angels that we never eat? How long have you been home? Surely, they've had time—"

"I didn't call them. There was food enough at Ponsonby House."

"Was there? I had no time between the galliards and the gossip."

"Your Lady Charlotte looked badly, I thought. She's added a year for every week since she was here. You must be a trying lover."

Gerald jumped up. He was flushed, his eyes blazing. "Good God, every soul in England seems to think I'm the only lover Ponsonby ever had!"

The outburst left Ajax with raised brows, staring at him. "What's wrong?"

"Laud, of course. What else would be wrong, in England?" He laughed shortly. "The little jackanapes has now taken to hiding in the bed curtains." He shrugged his big shoulders, as if to free them from a weight. "How did you like 'the Blessed Lady'?"

The tone strove too greatly for casualness. Ajax caught it, with sly appreciation. Gerald had planned it, had intended it, the miracle that had happened. He recalled Gerald's, "This is why I wanted you to come." Teasingly, he matched the casualness in Gerald's tone.

"She's very beautiful."

"Beautiful! God, is that all you can say?" Gerald looked so dismayed Ajax could hardly curb his laughter. "Oh, for Christ's sake, stop grinning at me. Beautiful! She's perfect, she's incredible, she's—God's final Name, I thought you had more of an eye for a woman—"

Dolly Wimple bustled in. She bore a tray, and overflowed with apology. Gerald appealed to her, "Wimple, if I showed you the last virgin in London, what would you say?"

"I wouldn't believe it. Not if you showed her to me! *Before* you clapped eyes on her, maybe—"

Ajax interrupted, "What's the racket at the stables?"

"The mare, Sir. She foaled an hour back, and—"

"Good God," cried Gerald, "Is everyone mad? Why didn't you say so?"

He rushed out, slamming the door behind him. Dolly shook her head.

"The poor lad is in a state! All this prating of virgins—A matter so easy remedied, too!" She nudged Ajax. "Is she mad, she won't have him?"

Ajax frowned, then forced a smile, at Dolly's dismayed face. How could she know that Clarissa was apart from all other women, that even Dolly could not jest about a matter so sacred as her purity? When Dolly saw her, when he brought her home, the old woman would know. Until then, he could not protest without betraying his precious secret.

"She's so divinely mad she'll have none of them."

"Ah?" nodded Dolly. "She's the first one with wit to get him, then."

"To get *him*?" Ajax was startled, then smiled. "No, you've twisted it. He's picked her for me."

Dolly looked at him sharply. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Either way, you're both back before cockcrow, for the first time since you found what the night was made for."

She paused, expecting an answer. When she did not get it, she looked at him again, and this time apprehension tinged her scrutiny.

After she had left the room, Ajax began to wander around it, aimlessly. The high mood that had lifted the early evening for him was broken. He realized he was tired, and self-distrust held him. What if Clarissa refused him? The mere fact that no woman ever had, and that Gerald had selected her for him, and that he loved her, could not assure her acceptance of him. Suckling's statement, "We all have—," proved she was a lady determined beyond the indication of her childlike gaze and fragile form. When Gerald returned

from the stables, he would tell him everything. With Gerald's aid and encouragement, he might succeed where so many others had failed.

He had come to his mother's chair, now. Without thinking, he put out his hand, and opened her crewel box.

In it lay a small rosette of Madonna blue.

He stood for a long time staring at it, struggling among impressions and recollections and unbelief as a swimmer struggles in a whirlpool, knowing in some instinct past reason that he is lost. The rosette he saw was one of the little ornaments Clarissa had worn that evening in her hair. There was only one way it could have come here: Gerald. In the moment when he had passed from Ajax's sight, Gerald had put the bit of ribbon in his mother's workbox, as a devotee places a relic in a shrine. Gerald, too, had entered very quietly. Gerald's face had been softened, transfigured, when he stood listening by the door, making sure he was alone and unobserved.

Gerald loved Clarissa.

Ajax lifted the rosette, and stood turning it over and over.

Gerald loved Clarissa.

That was why he had urged Ajax to go to the ball. That was why he had so resented Ajax's apparent coolness to her. That was why he had been so unreasonably, furiously angry at the light linking of his name with Charlotte's, and so eager to change the subject, and finally to escape altogether from Ajax's watchfulness and questions.

This night, for Gerald also, had been precious above all others.

Gerald loved Clarissa. And Dolly Wimple had known it!

For a single instant he wondered if Clarissa loved Gerald. If she did not—

He flung out a quick, repelling hand, as if the disloyal thought were a person whom he would strike from him. Clarissa liked Gerald enough to give him this precious token,

this part of herself. For the rest, it was only a matter of time. Any woman would love Gerald.

He was aware his hand had clenched over the ribbon. He opened it very gently. The little rosette lay on his palm, all its freshness gone. Like Clarissa, it was a fragile thing, easily crushed.

Staring at it, he drew a long shuddering breath. Clarissa must never know, never even guess, that she had hurt one brother to complete the happiness of the other. And Gerald—Gerald must never guess, either.

Gently, very gently, he straightened out the crumpled folds, and put the little blue rosette back in the box where it had lain so safe and blessed among his mother's treasures. Then he went slowly upstairs.

XII

GERALD WAS amazed when Charlotte's note reached him. He stood turning it over and over in his hands, like a man in a different life from that where it would have sent him rushing to her side, hot-brained and fever-mouthed. Yet it had been less than a year since he had first seen her. Now, except for wonder and a faint nostalgia as far removed from passion as the scent of June roses from the remote fragrance of an ancient potpourri, he felt nothing.

Almost annoyedly, he shook his head, and read the note again. Like other men who believe themselves "good lovers" because they "understand" women, his comprehension went no further than satisfying them to the convenient extent his mental and muscular patience permitted. He had believed their relationship ended with her acceptance of his refusal to marry her. Until now, he had encountered neither her will nor her tenacity, and he had seen no further than the dimple in her square chin, or the kisses to be filched from her firm mouth. A woman, to his mind, was intended by God as a lovemate, not a destiny-monger, and he could not account for the unease that held him now, even as he recalled her bright, bowed head, and pathetic yielding. What whim, what turning of the knife, made her want to see him, "this once more, and briefly"?

For himself, he detested tears and recriminations, and certainly had never expected them of a lady so glib of heart. But he could not forget he had impulsively promised to serve her should she ever wish it, nor ignore her urgency in begging him to come "directly." A setting sun was already sending shadows straight and black as prison bars across his road when he left Stacys Holding, and, looking back, he saw Dolly Wimple through a rising mist, which made her seem

more ghost than real. Impulsively he called to her, "I'll be home by midnight," but her answer was muffled, as if it came from another world.

He had lived so long with the dream and thought and presence of Clarissa that he had forgotten what it was like to be at the beck and call of another woman. Now, answering Charlotte's summons, he wondered what Clarissa would think, were she to hear of this. But she would not hear. Charlotte's note had all the marks of secrecy. And certainly, he would never mention it, where those small virtuous ears might be affronted. Clarissa, like chaste ladies the world over, would be incapable of seeing this meeting except as an assignation. She had already confided to him her regret for Charlotte's frailty. Riding swiftly over the darkening road, he recalled Clarissa's downcast eyes, and quivering lips, as she told him that Charlotte was now in retirement, where the Archbishop had sent her, himself having found her in adultery with a groom. It was all very sad, she murmured, and allowed two enormous tears to escape from her eyes—a manifestation which wrung Gerald's heart far more than Charlotte's plight.

As for the tale, both the groom and the Archbishop seemed very doubtful to Gerald. In spite of Laud's reputation for "eyes before and behind," which had given him the popular nickname of "the Calf," he could not picture His Grace entering either the groom's bedchamber or Charlotte's. On the other hand, though he had imprisoned Sir Robert Howard for begetting children of Lady Viscountess Porlock, the matter of adultery alone could hardly have merited such severe penance, or half of London would now be dwelling in the suburbs. He was convinced, as Charlotte herself had claimed, that the key to the whole affair was the lady's scorn of the Reading tailor who had sired the most powerful man in England. Combined with that, a kiss for a commoner, himself, for example, was sufficient to send her to the scaffold.

The night was growing darker. Against its weight the stars were arrestingly brilliant. He fixed his mind on them determinedly, picking out their patterns, wondering if Raleigh and Cabot had told the truth, that even those patterns varied as a ship strayed far from England. If true, it was no more than fitting. England, his England, deserved even her own stars.

He turned at last into the long avenue of yews reluctantly. Here, also, Charlotte had set her gardeners clipping strange fantastic creatures from shrub and tree. The autumn wind lashed them to fury, and they snarled darkly as he passed. He tried to dismiss the premonition that held him as his natural distaste for the unpleasant half-hour ahead, with a woman who still, perversely, loved him, and insisted on telling him so. But the first sight of the long, dark house, so far removed from the gaiety in which he had last seen it, increased his unease. When he stopped, no boy ran out to take his horse, no servant opened the door.

In the distance, one of Charlotte's white peacocks screamed. He jerked about in the saddle, and saw its spread tail quiver and fade in ghostly beauty. Frowning heavily, he dismounted. As he did so, he saw a candle pass an upper window, its flame blown back, as if whoever carried it was in great haste. A moment later, it reappeared at the next window, at the next, and finally fled down the whole long staircase, with indescribable sleek stealth.

The door opened. Charlotte stood there, shading the light with her long, shaking fingers. Above her pale face, her hair blazed like a banshee's.

"Gerald! Oh, thank God. You've come!"

She stood aside, motioning him to enter. As he did so, she closed the door swiftly, dropping the great bolt.

"What is it?"

But she only gestured him on, and hurried along a passage, to a small windowless room. In the faint candlelight, he saw the fabulous wall coverings of Spanish leather, the

glass from Venice, the porcelains from China. Yet the room, shut alike from sun and wind, was bleak.

She leaned forward, and lit the two great silver candelabra on the table, motioning to the wine in a service of silver-mounted Bohemian glass, and, as he helped himself, ran her slim lovely arm along the mantelshelf, as if for support.

"I have not sent for you idly. Nor for my pleasure." Her mouth was rueful. He could hardly hear her words, but he felt this was less for caution, than because of the emotion which stoppered them. "I am not even going to refer to the last time that I saw you. I know you care nothing for me. But—you said you would help me, if I ever needed you. And I do. Not for myself. Never for myself." Her voice broke bitterly. She waited, then hurried on, in the same monotonous monotone. "It's my brother," she said. She closed her eyes. The corners of her mouth twitched nervously. "He's very young. And— He's all I have. I know nothing—but this."

She thrust her hand between her breasts, so that they swelled voluptuously above her square-cut low bodice. Gerald, watching, remembered their smooth softness, their warmth, as he knew she intended he should. When, at last, he turned away, and poured himself another glass of wine, she drew her hand out, and thrust into his a crumpled scrap of silk. It had obviously been torn in haste from some gentleperson's garment, and a few words scrawled on it with great difficulty.

Before midnight. Puddle Wharf.

As Gerald strove to read it, her control broke utterly. "I cannot let him go like this! It's all our fault—yours as much as mine—he only tried to defend me. He's hardly more than a child—"

"I never knew you had a brother," he said stupidly.

"Oh, God, there's so much you never knew about me! You never cared to know anything—anything at all—except that I was made for love, and gave you pleasure. But that

doesn't matter, now. I wouldn't have you, if you were strung with rubies, and came on your knees from Land's End, begging me. But I can't let him suffer. They're sending him away—God knows where, or how—" she stopped, held by Gerald's glance, fixed on her petticoat showing a trifle under her full skirt. It was of the same material as the scrap of silk in his hand and, following his look, she hesitated, but recovered immediately. "Aye, look well!" she snapped. "That shows you how close we are. I made with my own hands a shirt for him, from material brought from the Indies for my own garments. He must have had it on when—this happened."

"But what *has* happened?"

"God in Heaven, how do I know? Do you think I am not mad with wondering which of Laud's fiendish tricks has trapped him? He's no more than a boy, I tell you, and when he heard of—of us—and my disgrace, he had not the wit to leave me, like the others. He went to Laud. That much I know. For the rest—"

"But what would you have me do?"

"Go to Puddle Wharf. Find out—somehow—whether he is on the ship. And if he is—"

"If he is?"

"Reach him. You are a man. You know how. If you want gold, to bribe them—"

"I have gold enough," he said slowly. He was going to add, But I have only one life. Did she know what she asked? Did she know what it meant to be caught aboard an outgoing ship, without sailing papers, even if one were not there to see a criminal? Apparently not. All he could trace in her face was a great anxiety, almost a madness. He had never known she could care so greatly for anyone. He turned away, humbled. She said quietly, "If you don't go, I shall have to. It—it's easier for a man. But it doesn't matter, really. My life ended, that night at Stacys Holding."

"Very well. I shall go."

"You will? Oh, Gerald— You will?" The intensity that had first dragged him to her like a magnet surged over him. It was almost suffocating, prohibiting thought, or even feeling. "Oh, Gerald—if there is ever anything—anything I can do— Make haste, for God's sake. Midnight is so soon!"

She was drawing, dragging him through the hall. With incredible speed, she flung back the heavy bar, opened the door, thrust him out. The door closed. He heard her, behind it, laughing, laughing, with a wildness of relief. He thought he heard the rustle of her velvet gown, but knew it was only the wind in the myrtle. Even the single candle had been snuffed. Ponsonby House was a place of the dead.

XIII

It WAS a relief to be again on the open road, a relief to sense no menace more mysterious than highwaymen. As Charlotte had said, it would be easy enough until he actually reached the wharf. He could tell when London loomed ahead, at last, a darkness upon darkness, its towers erasing the stars, and slowed his riding to avoid suspicion.

But no darkness could absorb the stench of Fleet Ditch. It assaulted him a half mile before he reached it. Yet he had never welcomed an Eastern perfume more gladly. Once across Fleet Ditch he was in the city itself, his journey practically ended. He came to Ludgate, found the breach in the wall, the wooden bridge across, next Bridewall Hospital. Two candles burned in their horn chimneys, on either side. He paused, as the inscription on the horn bade him, to pray for the souls of Stephen Foster and Agnes his wife, who of their charity had bequeathed the lights to cheer night travelers. He was honestly grateful to them for the small pool of light. At noon, his route would have been neither savory nor well-favored; by night, it seemed the fruitless struggle of a dream.

The narrow streets, sunless by day where the overhanging stories of opposite houses all but met, were catacombs now. As he struck through the city to the docks, the congestion made them almost impassable. The rare light of a linkboy, fighting his way along, calling "Room, make room!" for his following patron, fell on struggling groups of prentices with barrows or handcarts; meat animals driven bellowing to the docks, for shipment to the colonies; household goods, tragic remnants of once prosperous homes, heaped on carts or human backs for transportation to the wharves; cursing men, sobbing women, screaming children no more lost than their

elders, had they but known it; thieves who trusted to the confusion for a crust, before they should hang for it; honest men who trusted the same confusion for escape from Laud's England; all of them, walling street after street, so that at last he was forced to turn aside, to seek a courtyard where he might leave his horse, that he might force his way through afoot.

The door he chose was opened by a woman. He could not see her face, but the husky voice and heavy scent that rushed out to attack the fetid street, told him her business, and he cursed softly. Waterfront brothels had poor reputations for safety. But he had no time to be dainty. Midnight was too near. He explained his need, and she slouched out, unlocking the gate, and helping him lead the mare inside the small courtyard. He liked neither the finality with which she turned the key nor the gleam of her eye, reflected very briefly by the light of a broken lantern above her door, but it was no moment to weigh the gold he would have to pay for the animal's ransom.

He turned swiftly, frowning, so heavy with thought he nearly knocked over a woman in his path. She cursed capably, and hardly knowing what he did, he reached out, and caught her arm.

"God's final Name! Matilda!" She stopped with a little cry, then turned, trying to pull away, but he held her fast. "Matilda— What are you doing here?"

"My husband. He's a baker's prentice. He just put aboard a dozen sacks of bread. I—I helped him carry them. Let me go."

He laughed softly. He knew she was lying. "I'm glad to see you, you hussy. Except that I don't see you, of course."

"No," she muttered, "No. You don't see me. Let me go."

"You're always in such a rush to leave me," he complained. "I can't understand why. I'll wager you regretted the last time."

"Let me go!" she cried, and he was abruptly aware she was weeping.

"Matilda! Good God— I'd no notion— Tell me. You're well? Your husband's good to you? Have you a baby?"

"One. A boy. He's— But what is it to you? Let me go, I say!"

"All right. Go, then. But I'm glad you have a son, Matilda. England has need of boys by stout wenches like you. Tell your husband I wish him as good success in future. And you—"

She twisted about with the swiftness of a cat, and bit his restraining hand. Surprised rather than hurt, he loosed his hold.

"God's final Name! If you aren't the most ungrateful—"
But she was gone.

The encounter had cleared his head, but left him more revolted than before with Charlotte's errand. He fought and struggled through the crowd, and stood at Puddle Wharf.

For a moment, incredulity, then discouragement, swept him. No ship lay alongside. He was too late.

Immediately, however, the activity at the next pier struck him. Charlotte's brother must have mistaken the wharf. In his haste and confusion, that was natural enough. He turned briskly, unaware of the figure that detached itself from the shadow of a pile, mingling with the crowd as he moved away, stopping as he stopped, before the barricade.

The entrance of the wharf had been closed, to assure precision of the King's Searchers. To be found on it now was a serious offense. For a man already under Laud's disfavor to board the vessel, without sailing papers, might mean death. He hesitated, wondering why he should even hesitate. After all, he owed Charlotte nothing. But he could not reason away her pathos, nor the knowledge that somewhere aboard that ship was a lad, suffering for the pleasure he had so lightly taken. And strangely, too, he could not reason away the morbid conviction that his relationship to

Charlotte was in some way a stain upon his love for Clarissa. A dozen times, he had been on the verge of telling her his love, only to see in her pure and guileless eyes a faith in him that could not bear full knowledge of the affair. That she would gain in her own eyes by forgiving him, and so in some mysterious measure be almost grateful to him for his backsliding, could not have occurred to him. He knew too completely that to suspect a fault in her would mar the orb'd perfection of his love. But tonight would expiate his fault. From tonight, he would be free of Charlotte, free to tell Clarissa of his love.

He pushed his way forward, and almost immediately a turmoil on the vessel gave him an opportunity to dodge between the bars, and mingle with the crowd, whose pent excitement had broken through at last. The guards were running from all sides, a woman was screaming with the staccato uncontrol of hysteria, babies were howling, men shouting protests.

Some poor devil caught without papers, he thought, and pressed forward with the crowd, one eye on the slimy steps by which he hoped to board the vessel. *If they'll just mob the guards—*

But they did not. In time, they remembered. They drew apart, their hatred pressed down into their hearts, their cries hushed. Gerald was beside the steps now, sure that no one had noticed him there. In a moment, he would chance it. Once aboard, his errand accomplished, he could dive from the ship, reach shore before he was retaken. It was not easy to bring a ship about in the narrow channel, and they would never risk launching a small boat. If one of the sailors, greedy for the large reward, dove over after him, he could prove himself as good a man as any waterfront bully.

He actually had one foot extended when the sound of bones breaking under a blow, of a man's scream, held him. A figure fell past him, striking the steps before it disappeared under the surface scum. He felt the blood spatter him, and

leaning over, believed he saw in the momentary gap of water the expectant, expert fish, wheeling closer. At the same moment, a hand fell on his arm.

Striking blindly, he wrenched free, and dove. Before he touched the water, he heard the alarm, saw the lanterns converging, and blessed the filth that eddied on the surface, concealing his movements. When his aching lungs forced him up again, he saw the searchers still huddled in the glow of their combined lights, watching the place where he had disappeared.

He crawled out, lying for several minutes motionless where he could plunge back, if necessary. But all London seemed to have rushed to the scene of the excitement, and after a while he rose, and strode away. By good luck, he had come up nearer the brothel where he had left the mare than was Puddle Wharf. Except for his wet clothes and the loss of his hat, and the chill that struck to his bones, he was none the worse for his adventure. And he had discharged his debt. Even Charlotte could expect no more than he had done.

He was almost cheerful when he banged the door, at last. The same blowsy madam who had opened before met him, but there was no recognition in her face. He thought his wetness responsible, until she spoke.

"We've naught to suit the likes o' you," she told him, and would have shut the door had he not heedlessly flung his full weight against it.

"You've one animal to my liking," he said. "I'll take my horse, and leave your sluts for the devil."

"Your horsel!" she screamed, and opened the door so suddenly he lost his balance. "Hi! Help! Thieves!"

Recovering his feet, he saw the front door had been closed swiftly behind him, as all the doors but one on either side the narrow filthy hall flew open. Half a dozen screaming, clawing strumpets flung themselves on him, tearing off the jeweled buttons of his jerkin, the silver buckles of his

shoes. He had dressed with great care and elegance for his last, brief visit to Charlotte, and though she had not appreciated it, there was no doubt these her sisters did. One, cleverer than her fellows, marked the bulge where his wet clothes betrayed his purse, and relieved him of it with such deftness he did not even know it. In the midst of the turmoil, the heavy knocker fell on the front door. Instantly, silence fell. And at that moment, the one door that had remained shut, opened.

Gerald could not see who had opened it. Before he could catch his breath, all the women together had lifted him bodily, and flung him inside with a precision that proclaimed long practice. The door closed, and the woman who had opened it flung the heavy bar across, and turned.

It was Matilda.

Her lips moved soundlessly. "Be still. You're quite safe."

He heard the argument outside, the madam's wheedling mention of a noble patron, her hurried, hushed words, with lips pressed to the door. "We're opening. I dare not refuse. 'Tis His Grace's guard. Best let Rachel aid you."

"No need," said Matilda. "He's half dead. I can manage."

The madam started to protest, but the renewed clang of the knocker cut her short.

"Quick," Matilda said, and kicked aside a rag of carpet over a trap door. "In there. I must wipe the floor. There's naught to fear."

He wondered how she knew he was glad to hide, instead of calling to the guard to help him, but there was no time to ask. The madam's protests stopped before he heard Matilda kick the carpet back in place above him. A moment later, he heard the rubbing of the cloth, drying the floor where he had stood.

He dared not move from the spot where he had landed. The moment he saw the trap door, he knew what Matilda had meant when she assured the madam she could "man-

age." He wondered how often Matilda had "managed" before, what had been the ultimate fate of the others who had occupied this dark retreat: sailors back from the Indies, their pockets weighty with gold; apprentices who, having discharged their master's errands, believed they could steal an hour's pleasure, before returning to him with his gains. Whatever had happened to them, Gerald knew he was, as Matilda had said, safe enough, provided no unwary step plunged him into the quicksand and lime he suspected near by. The madam would never let him be discovered here. He realized now he had heard her calling to the guard, while he was still outside, the name of the powerful patron who protected the house, for a percentage of its gains. When that had no effect, she knew she was trapped, even more surely than she had trapped him.

He heard heavy footsteps overhead, the murmur of voices. He was sure now that the hunt was for him. Somehow, they had traced him here. How, he could not imagine, though once they picked up the wet trail it would not have been difficult. Yet who had seen him, who had been so intent on him, him alone, that all the confusion was powerless to break the scent? Again, the premonition that had held him ever since the delivery of Charlotte's letter closed in on him. Women. Women were the foundation of men's troubles. Even as children, they were dangerous. Mary had really begun this whole plague. In her train had come Charlotte. Even Clarissa had been the final reason for his undertaking so mad a mission. Of them all, only Matilda had assisted him. If he escaped, he would do something substantial for Matilda.

At last, there was silence overhead, but Matilda did not come, and the darkness and mustiness became oppressive. His muscles were cramped with cold, and the fear of moving. He began to doubt even Matilda. What was she doing here? Had she really hidden him for compassion—or to gain a greater share of the spoils?

Even as he doubted, he heard the carpet swished aside. A knifeblade of light cut the darkness. He saw Matilda. She held a candle, and was peering in as though she feared what she might see.

"Thank God," she whispered. "I feared—but no matter. Can you pull yourself out?"

He flushed at her doubt of it, yet found the task harder than he had imagined. When at last he squatted grunting on the floor, she made a quick sign to him to be silent.

"They think you're done for. I told them so. We must both get out of this." She was very white, her eyes enormous in their dark hollows. He would hardly have known her for the girl who had left Stacys Holding. "They put the mare in the back lot, after the guard came. She's had a good rest, now, and if you're willing—"

"Willing! Good God, you didn't think I'd leave you?"

She looked at him oddly, but did not answer.

He said, "You must return to Stacys Holding with me, Matilda."

"And what of Walt, and the boy?"

"I'd forgotten you had a child. You may bring him, of course."

"You forget soon."

"This has been a long night, for remembering. How did you happen to be here, Matilda?"

"I have my trade along the waterfront. One house or another, from time to time. Tonight, I saw you coming from here, remember. I'd have passed along, but the mare knew me and whinnied, and when I looked close and saw she was yours, I knew you'd be back. I'd wondered why they let you go, in the first place. They knew they could do better, later, with fewer passers-by."

She looked drawn and old. He put a sudden, pitying hand on her shoulder, but she moved away brusquely.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes. But whatever happens, you're done with—this. I owe you more than money after tonight."

"And I may ask more," she told him, but her eyes filled, even as she said harshly, "Come now. There's no time for blathering."

XIV

IN ONE* of the intimate apartments of Whitehall, two men sat at a table. They were both small men, and slightly built, but the arrogance in the eyes of one, and the wit in the eyes of the other, accomplished more than many inches would have done. Behind the one at the table's head, the Gentleman Blackrod-in-waiting strove to hide with an air of official indifference his very real amazement at an object which had recently been added to the piles of papers which always lay between the two. It was a bedraggled hat.

It was the more pitiable in that it had so recently been a very elegant affair. It had a broad brim and a high crown, and in quality was not inferior to that worn by the gentleman who now regarded it with considerable annoyance, as the final unwelcome episode in a difficult day. He disliked its persistent jauntiness, the continued elegance of the jeweled and monogrammed buckle, and, contradictorily, the tragic droop of the broken golden feather.

Twice, the man at the side of the table reached toward it. Each time the other glanced at his notes and spoke with a haste edging sharpness.

"What has Your Grace done concerning the Scottish Assembly? Is there an end to it, as I commanded?"

"The order was sent immediately the seal was set to it, Sire."

"The order! But did they obey it? Have they gone home?"

"I regret that even Your Majesty's edict, making the session treason—"

"Are you telling me that they continue to sit?"

"They are a stubborn people, Sire. A stubborn and a stiff-necked people, and by no means appreciative of the Royal patience."

Charles leaned back and drummed his fingers on the table. He disliked imagining the comment of his birdlike little French wife, his sharp-eyed Italian mother-in-law, now inconveniently on a visit to England, on the "stubborn and stiff-necked people." They both felt there was a way of dealing with such matters, which Charles had an uncomfortable premonition would not suit the English temperament. There was no record in France of Hampdens refusing to pay ship-money, of Prynnes preaching from the pillory, of whole counties rushing to the Louvre, assaulting the Royal ears with grievances in a manner at times positively abusive. His wife and mother-in-law hinted that France's power and outward calm was due to the strength of the Cardinal Minister, Richelieu; but for the life of him, Charles could imagine no one stronger, nor more troublesomely positive, than his own Laud could be, when he set his mind to it.

The case in question proved it. For the most part, he gave Laud a free rein in his personal animosities, but this time, he felt he must intervene. There was no use stirring up a beehive, unless there were honey to gain, and particularly if the bees had done one a favor. His right eyebrow, a trifle higher than the left and kinked sharply toward the nose, soared to a position of querulous astonishment.

"And with half the Kingdom in open defiance, you trouble me with a feather!" He paused, then as Laud opened his mouth to reply, hastened on, "But doubtless, you have some cure for the Scots?"

"Strafford suggests an army—"

"An army?" Charles brightened. Why not? This would be firm. It would be a Royal gesture. Both Henrietta Maria and Marie de Medici must approve it. Also, it could not fail to impress even the Scots. His faith in his advisers rose as swiftly as it had fallen a few moments back. "Excellent! We should have known that between you, you would find a way."

"May I beg leave to remind your Majesty that the idea did not originate at Lambeth? In fact, not two nights back,

I dreamed—" he stopped before the mockery in Charles's soaring eyebrow.

"Come, come. Your Grace is hardly suggesting that an hour's nap is more useful in ruling a kingdom than an army? You can hardly advocate the fluttering of a dream book in the faces of the Scots, as antidote to the Prayer Book?"

Laud flushed, struggling against the wrath that rose in him whenever the fiasco at Edinburgh was brought to mind. "An army would be an extreme measure. It could not fail to rouse opposition—"

"And is there no opposition now?"

"I had hoped that the negotiations with Montrose and Argyle might bear fruit."

"Such fruit is slow to ripen. And in the meantime, we are pestered by a scourge of locusts which may eat the blossom before it matures. Look at the Demands the Covenanters had the effrontery to send me."

"You disposed of them without hesitation, Sire."

"I wrote to Hamilton I would rather die than yield to their impudent and damnable demands. But I have no intention of sitting passively and waiting for any such débacle. You should be the first to see that an army will settle everything. It will put the fear of God in them. Strafford has one already raised—"

"It will take time for training."

"Training? Training for what? What sort of army is it, if it needs additional training to strike a pike into a beetle-browed Covenanter, good for nothing but sitting on his buttocks and droning psalm tunes through his nose? Tell Wentworth I like his plan so much I shall lead the expedition myself. We shall go at once."

"May I remind you, Sire, that it is winter, and the Northern climate notoriously severe?"

"Make it the spring. Make it the anniversary of my Coronation. That will be a fitting and subtle reminder to them of who is master. What else?"

"There remains the matter of Master Stacy."

"Surely that has been disposed of. Ponsonby was sent from Court. The measure seems severe, though I would be the last to condone her conduct. Why any King so moral, so honestly devoted to his wife and his family, should be surrounded by so shameless a group of pimps and harlots— But the matter is closed. We will think no more of it."

"Alas, Sire—I beg your forgiveness—but the matter is not closed. I grieve that I must trouble you further with it, but at the time of Lady Charlotte's punishment, you ordered me to do nothing concerning Master Stacy."

"Why should you? Men are not made of steel. And the more I heard of the lady's indiscretions, the more I realized he was not to blame."

"But Her Royal Highness— If for nothing else, he should have been censured for such small respect for the Crown. His attitude toward Her Royal Highness—"

"We have been over that before. Even Her Royal Highness may have—imagined certain details. After all, she was far from well at the time. She had suffered a severe shock, and was doubtless feverish." He frowned and began tapping the table again. "The matter is closed."

"Very well, Sire. The matter *was* closed. But it has been reopened. Master Stacy has evidently too great faith in the Royal lenience. But if I have permission, I shall be delighted to attend to the details without further troubling—"

"You will do nothing of the kind. I am not one to forget a kindness. If there is further information—"

"There is—"

"Which has not been flavored by a young girl's romancing—"

"There is no romance about this matter, Sire."

"Speak then, why don't you? What is it you are trying to say? The words crowd your tongue till your mouth hangs open like any zany's. Is the matter of such importance that it must intrude on affairs of State in this manner?"

"Had I not been precisely instructed, it would not have done so, Sire. But it is of importance. It is of importance, because Master Stacy has now twice proven his carelessness for any respect to the Crown. Even without your daughter's witness, it would have remained apparent that he was unaware of the great honor done him by permitting her to remain beneath his roof. Now, I understand his contempt progressed to the point of sheer insolence. This hat was picked up by one of my most trusted men, when its owner dived into the river to escape being taken without sailing papers, as he boarded a ship for the Virginia Colony."

"But surely, Master Stacy is not the only G.S. in London!"

"He is the only gentleman known to wear, at all hours, and for every occasion, a plume of this peculiar tint. Moreover, he was followed and identified by my informant, after I had been warned of his intention. Your Majesty's lenience—"

"It is not lenience," Charles said. "It is that, above all else, ingratitude seems the most glaring fault in any man, but most of all in a king. This Master Stacy rescued our daughter, took her to his home, and cared for her most tenderly."

"Most tenderly, Sire."

"We have Harvey's word for it that she was not alone unharmed, but excellently attended, and nursed in so far as the household permitted. It would be poor reward to imprison him, for some youthful peccadillo."

"But if he were to be proven as prime mover in a plot—"

"We cannot credit it. What plot?"

"Sire, there are many small uprisings—"

"Far too many for one man to have incited. Have you no cure for them?"

"None, unless Your Majesty will permit me to use it."

Charles leaned back again. Laud seemed so sure. And Laud was always right. Why he was so set to ruin Gerald Stacy was a mystery, but for that matter, most of Laud's dis-

likes were. Yet when he had intervened in the past, matters had gone from bad to worse, with riots, and mobs, and scandalous broadsheets even flung in the Royal coach as he rode. Laud had hinted they mistook mercy for weakness. And Laud was always right.

I wish he had succeeded in boarding the ship, and got away entirely, he thought. *Then I would have been rid of the matter for good.* He said testily, "It is a marvel to all of us, my lord, that you can so concern yourself with details, and yet leave no great matter of state unconsidered." But he still thought, *If he had only gone—*

"No detail is too small, when it concerns Your Majesty's welfare," Laud began smoothly, but jumped as the King's hand smote the table.

"You need concern yourself no further in this matter, however, my lord. We have come to a decision, quite unaided, to liberate your talents for more pressing affairs of state."

He rose. His eyebrow was triumphantly ascendant as the Archbishop gathered his notes, and bowed. But, when Canterbury reached out for the hat, he put his own hand on it with unexpected firmness.

"We are attending to that matter personally," he said, and smiled suddenly, like a rather naughty child, over Laud's shoulder at the Gentleman Blackrod.

XV

AJAX STOOD in the sunshine, gnawing on a short rib like a healthy hound, and grinning as he smacked his lips. The desire that had seized him like an illness, the hunger that grew with the knowledge of its futility, he had driven behind him, forcing himself to go where he must see Gerald and Clarissa together, paring his smile to a polite friendliness, cloaking eyes and voice with the merest courtesy. And now, at last, the weeks had brought their reward. He could stand in the sunshine, and gnaw on a bone like a hound, and grin with honest comfort in the physical warmth, the physical satisfaction. Not even the doubt that now held him could pierce the carefully forged armor he had welded to protect himself alike from pain and ecstasy.

When Tanker had told him that Gerald had received a note from a lady, and rushed off at breakneck speed, only pausing to dress himself with the utmost care and elegance, Ajax steeled himself anew against the blow that must now fall. Clarissa had accepted Gerald. All night, he had waited, fortifying himself with brandy against Gerald's return, saying over and over the carefully composed words of congratulation, praying that Gerald, in his rapture, would not notice their stiffness, would not feel their insincerity.

But Gerald had not returned. Even when Ajax, rising late after his night of waiting, had bellowed a greeting, it had gone unanswered. He went to his brother's room, and found it empty, the bed made up, the floor unlittered with boots or coat or breeches, the surest sign of Gerald's presence. Had it not been for Clarissa, Ajax would simply have known that one more lady had proven tractable, as she well might,

sooner instead of later, thus enjoying the full flavor of Gerald's new passion. But now, that could not be. Gerald, as Ajax with sickening heart had observed too well, was as changed by Clarissa's coming as himself. The faint hope that Clarissa might be no more than one of Gerald's lightning fancies, had faded with every passing day. No lady could hold Gerald from Stacys Holding, now. No lady except Clarissa. And Clarissa, being Clarissa, would not.

Ajax flung the bone to the clamoring hounds, admonished them half-heartedly not to fight for it, and wiped his mouth on his embroidered cuff, cursing the fashion that made it so rough to the lips. No wonder little squares of linen or silk were coming into use for the purpose. He must tell Wimple to get some. He went inside, slamming the door soundly. The sun had done its work. If such a sun could shine in winter, even briefly, none but a coward would doubt that spring must come. Only a man beset as Vane was could believe there was anything really wrong with the world, and England in particular. Why, England had always had troubles: small internal difficulties like King John or Bloody Mary, or outside annoyances, such as the Armada and Mary Stuart. But England itself was sound. True, Laud was a sore trial, drunk with authority like any other peasant with sudden and absolute power, and Charles—mute even the thought as he would, he must admit it—Charles, poor King, hectored by his birdlike little French wife and his dominant advisers, was at best a well-meaning weakling. But England—ah, there was a different matter. He himself, prodded on one side by Vane and on the other by Suckling, had spent weary nights of indecision, but had now determined simply to sit at home, air no opinion, and wait for the storm to pass, secure always in the knowledge that England was sound.

He strode through to the main room, yelled for the best brandy, and, when it arrived, drank heavily. How long he sat there, he did not know. He was only aware that it was dark when Tanker and Dolly Wimple, each with a lighted

candelabra, came to announce a visitor, a Master John Milton, his neighbor, and a friend of Gerald's. When Milton left, he took with him Ajax's hard-earned peace of mind.

It was past midnight when Gerald returned. The smell of Ajax's brandy and Ajax's sweat and Ajax's pipe met him in the hall. Thank God, he was home.

The past hours had been a nightmare, the flight through darkness, the daylight hiding. But now, at last, he was home. He had nothing to fear. He shouted for Tanker and Dolly, for Boots and Tom and Will and Jane. They tumbled in grinning, from pantry and kitchen and buttery, seeking his bidding. He thumbed his nose at them all, whacked Dolly's fat thigh resoundingly, and sent them back about their business. He was home.

A moment later, he howled for food, and brought them scurrying in again, laughing at their confusion. Then he flung himself in the chair opposite Ajax, and leaned his head back wearily, his exultation spent as swiftly as it had come.

Ajax held his brandy high. His hand was a little unsteady, his eyes imperfectly focused, his voice not quite clear. "God bless you," he said, adding as if the notion amazed him, "And God bless me! And them, too, by God." He waved the inhaler at the pictured Stacys, watching him with well-bred impersonality. "God bless us all. We're great folk. We've always been great folk. And we always shall be, by God. God bless us." He downed the brandy, and smacked his lips. Then he noticed Gerald was not drinking. "Have some. God bless you. Have some. It'll warm your guts."

"Later. I'm going to eat now."

"Eat?" Ajax grunted scornfully. "I haven't eaten all day. I haven't eaten in a week. Tell you the truth, don't believe I've eaten since Whitsuntide. I've been entertaining a dour devil, with a long nose and a voice like a kettledrum. Said you knew him. Said—"

"Listen," Gerald interrupted, leaning forward. "Try to listen to me, Ajax. Just how drunk are you?"

"I'm not drunk. I'm just getting my belly warm. Brrr! Whythell don't they put a log on the fire?"

"God's final Name, I wish you could understand me."

Something in the tone clutched Ajax's attention. He shook his great head as if to free it of the fog. "Nothing's amiss, is it?"

"I don't know. Possibly not. Probably not."

"That's right." Ajax leaned forward, tried to slap his knee approvingly, missed, teetered, recovered himself, and continued. "England's all right. Thought so all along. It's just that man Vane, and your friend, Milton." He paused, but through the mist Gerald's face still seemed white, troubled. "Look here, don't *you* get notions. You're too sound. Just like England. England's sound as a drum. Is now. Always has been. And will be. Just like God. God bless us.—Look here, you think I'm drunk, or you'd tell me what's amiss."

"No. Not now. Oh, for God's sake, I know you aren't drunk. Of course not. But— I want to talk to you. I have a feeling—" he broke off, as Tanker entered, with a tray. It was heavy with glass and plate, and jingled as he set it down.

Ajax kicked him in the ankle. "Get out, you lummo. Get out before you smash everything. Can't you see my brother's talking? My God, it's hard enough to get him to talk, without you breaking all the crockery to stop him.—Do you know what we need around here, Gerald? A woman. Yes, by God, a woman. We haven't had a woman here since Matilda. That's too long."

"Then why don't you get one?" Gerald snapped.

"Too tired. When you're tired, a woman's the devil. Rather have a good horse. Horse does all the work, when you're tired. Have a drink."

"No," said Gerald absently. He was thinking of Ajax claiming a woman was too much trouble. He hadn't realized

how long it had been since one of Ajax's trollops and one of his own had enlivened their bachelorhood with their shrill squabbling. He looked at Ajax uncertainly. *I wonder why*, he thought. Ajax would tell him, if he asked. But he would not ask. Not while Ajax was drunk. If Ajax chose to tell him, when he was sober— *God's final Name!* he thought, *He can't have fallen in love!*

He rose, poured himself brandy, and stood staring at it. "Ajax," he said finally, "are you sober enough to understand? What would you do if I were to get married?"

Ajax set his glass down. It had come. It had come at last. But even expecting it as he had, the question had struck him sober with shock. "Married?" he echoed.

"Why don't you get married yourself?" Gerald tried a new direction.

"I?" Involuntarily, Ajax's eyes moved to the crewel box beside his mother's chair. For a moment, a sentence trembled on his tongue; but even with his mind still clouded, he knew he must not speak it. He must not speak it, because Gerald loved Clarissa, and he loved them both. His eyes rushed back to Gerald, who watched him, puzzled. He rose abruptly. His laugh, loud as ever, but without the resounding heartiness which was its kernel, echoed through Stacys Holding. "*I get married! I—get married! No, no. You do it, Gerald. You do it—for both of us!*"

XVI

GERALD SAT by the fire until dawn, dozing, drinking, trying to reach the bottom of the problem. Charlotte. Minute by minute, he retraced every fact, every impression, from the moment that her note had been delivered to him. The silk, matching her own petticoat. The empty wharf. The Archbishop's guard, following him so persistently, clinging to him through all the confusion. And her brother. He had never heard of her brother. Had she, herself, until that hour? And over and under and around all the rest, binding them together into a bleak whole, that instinct, that premonition, that had haunted him from the instant he held her letter in his hands.

He had escaped, this time. He told himself that, over and over. The trap so cleverly set was empty. But would Charlotte be satisfied? He remembered her softness, her yielding, so strangely following the passionate outburst in her garden, the night of the ball. He had distrusted it, even then. How right he had been! God, a man was a fool ever to trust a woman. Yet, even as he thought it, he remembered Matilda.

It seemed years since last night, when he had stood, stiff and exhausted, beneath the trap door in the brothel; years since this morning when, in the dark before dawn, he and Matilda had threaded the narrow streets of the city, leading the mare, after their first mad ride to freedom. He grunted, even now, remembering how the animal had whinnied, getting his scent, how a window had been flung out, and the madam, her heavy wrinkled breasts pendulous in the light of her candle, had screamed an alarm. Fortunately, the watchman, well paid in the past to keep away from the locality, could not hear, and by the time the place had poured

its shrieking inmates into the street, they were beyond capture.

He had offered again to bring Matilda back with him, but she would not come, even when he tendered the child a home. He wondered about the boy, for she would not talk of it, as other mothers talked of their babies. When he pressed her, she told him she lived near by, and left him, returning to assure him, with a clear, meaningful look, that hiding was safer in the city than out of it. But he would not hide. He would never hide. Stacys Holding was his home. He would never leave it for any man, short of the King himself.

He rose wearily, now, filled his glass, and, standing before the portrait of the first Stacy of Stacys Holding, raised it silently. But whether he drank to the King, or the acres his fathers had owned for generations, or the man who had first put his mark upon them, he did not know. It did not matter, really. They were all one loyalty. The King was England. England was Stacys Holding. He went to bed, secure in that.

With the passing days, his security grew. Life had returned to its old channels. He heard that Charlotte was still in retirement. From time to time, he heard bits of gossip about her, usually from Clarissa, who, in her tiny home, was increasingly accessible. He spent long hours in her small drawing room, wondering why he never could quite declare his love, not dreaming that she was holding his suit in abeyance until she was positive that the earl, whom she had been hoping for, had no mind to marry. For the rest, he never guessed what she knew very well—that Ajax, also, loved her, and that, given her free choice, she would have taken the older brother.

It was February when the idyl broke.

Gerald had so long believed himself secure that he watched the single horseman turn into the long drive of Stacys Holding without apprehension. He even strode out to meet

him, head high and teeth flashing in welcome. It was not until he saw the insignia on the man's sleeve and on the saddle that he recognized the King's messenger.

"Master Gerald Stacy?"

Gerald nodded, his smile stiffening. "Your servant, Sir. And you?"

The other swung from the saddle, and took from a case a document, heavily ribboned and sealed.

"I have the honor, Sir, to be the bearer of a message which His Most Gracious Majesty has expressly commanded to be placed in your hands."

Gerald broke the seals, and scanned the involved phrases. He told himself he did not know, he could not know, what they meant. The letters danced under his eyes: "In recognition of certain services . . . certain lands and holdings . . . to my beloved subject, GERALD STACY, gent., to be occupied by him forthwith."

Gerald's hand fell. He shook his head, like a bewildered child. "I don't understand," he said, so quietly it sounded almost plaintive.

"His Majesty was quite positive that you *would* understand. But in the event that you should fail to do so, he empowered me to make the circumstance quite clear. In view of your hospitality to Her Royal Highness, a year back, His Majesty has been graciously pleased to bestow upon you certain estates in the Virginia Colonies."

"But—to be occupied— God's final Name, no one occupies the wilderness!"

"On the contrary, Master Stacy, you will find neighbors to your liking, I am quite sure. There are several settlements. And His Majesty has been pleased to establish the fact past doubt that these lands are of a rare fertility, entirely habitable, and the living to be obtained from them suitable to a gentleman of your tastes and accomplishments."

They met each other's eyes squarely, and the pause be-

tween them lengthened. Then Gerald said softly, "But—it is banishment, none the less. Banishment—with a kiss."

The messenger's face did not change. Possibly he had expected some such comment, for he opened his case again, and this time took from it a small package, wrapped in oiled silk.

"His Majesty has instructed me to say that his generosity in this matter is notable, and contrary to the advice of his councilors. And should you still fail to understand, I am to give you this. No—do not open it, if you please. I may not know its contents. When I am gone—"

But Gerald, taking the package, knew he need not open it then or later, to discover what it contained. And he had believed, all these weeks, that he was safe! Safe— Bitterness choked him, surging through his veins, breaking through his pores, until his sweat, his blood, his vomit seemed all gall.

The messenger said, "If there is any question you would care to ask, I have been instructed to answer it."

"Yes!" The word tore through his parched lips. "Have you by any chance the honor of the Lady Charlotte Ponsonby's acquaintance?"

The messenger's eyes were suddenly wary, but he bowed. "I have."

"Then possibly you can tell me whether this is the colony to which her young brother recently emigrated."

"Her brother? You must have been misinformed, Sir. I have known the lady half my life, and she is an only child."

"Thank you."

"Is there anything else?"

"When you next see her, I beg you will tell her I inquired for her brother."

The messenger swung back to his saddle, touched the brim of his wide hat with his crop. "Your servant, Sir."

"Sir, yours to command."

He said it bleakly, not trying to disguise the bitterness in

it, and saw the other's raised brows, decently disapproving. When he had turned his horse, and started away, Gerald spat in the road where he had stood.

The action, prompted by an impulse too deep to discern, recalled him. He hated the man, he hated his message, he hated—

"Good God, have mercy!" he said, and sank his head in his hands. He knew at last what Vane and the others had meant. He knew what Prynne had felt, crying aloud from the stocks that England was betrayed, and Englishmen no longer free.

He had been banished—banished without trial, sentenced without knowing he was under suspicion. He, Gerald Stacy, whose ancestor had forced a King to his bidding, at Runnymede.

He tore the silk from the package, and stood staring, grinning at the broken draggled plume in his hand. He had been banished—banished for a feather's witness.

Sharply, he took the hat from his head. Sharply, he tore from it the fine new plume, and trampled it underfoot, sticking through the gaping buckle the one the messenger had brought. It had proven his undoing. But as there was a God in heaven, it would also blaze his rising.

XVII

CLARISSA KNEW, before she took Gerald's note in her hands, what it would say. Its intensity had run before it, outstripping words. It had come at last. Her troubles were at an end.

Gerald was not a Prince, or a Duke, or an Earl, but he was a gentleman of very old and illustrious family, and wealthier than many nobles. Moreover, he was not distraught, driven before the wind of change, tossed like a leaf on the instability of the King's favor, like many of high degree. She had discovered what many women before and since have known: In wartime, half a loaf is better than none. Gerald Stacy would do. He would do very well.

She unfolded the paper and reread the brief message. It could mean nothing else, this urgent plea for an immediate meeting, that he might lay before her a matter of "most grave consequence." A quick light flickered in her pale eyes, her small mouth curved triumphantly. She wrote one word, "Come," and gave it to the waiting Tanker.

She knew she had very little time. Tanker had told her Gerald was even then at the Rainbow, awaiting her answer. And Gerald in this mood would not linger in any coffee house once he had it. On the whole, she was glad. She realized the months while she had been holding him off, weighing value against value, had been trying for her. The worst fear she had was that Gerald might guess Ajax's passion. That might have been fatal. The Stacys were fools about each other. Having decided to accept Gerald, she intended to hold them both. It would take skill, finesse in maneuvering, but she could do it. In that way, she would be the unquestioned mistress of Stacys Holding, her children heirs to the double fortune. She had waited too long to come into her own, to fail, now. "Her own," as they must

discover, involved both brothers, all they were, all they possessed.

Spitting small, precise instructions to her maid, she caught up a housegown, all ruffles and rosebuds, slapping the poor wench when she fumbled, screaming aloud and stamping when a lacing snapped. She must be ready: ready with her artless curls, her innocent eyes, her air of startled maidenhood. So would Gerald be made to feel how much he asked. So would he be kept in sturdy remembrance of her sacrifice, all his days.

She tucked a small bag of lavender between her breasts, and her maid hung a pomander ball beneath her petticoat. Gerald liked these homely scents, for their "wholesomeness." Once he was safely wed to her, bell and book and candle, that would be an end to wholesomeness. The Stacy fortune would bring her attar from the Orient, set in ambergris that had cost doughty seafarers their lives. She put the small bows at her temples, and thought of the pearls she would wind there. Finally, leaning close to the fading mirror, she marked again, with untiring delight, her fragility and fairness, and determined to have her portrait done by Lely. He was only a boy, yet, but what a boy. Her patronage would establish him in fashion—and mark her own triumph. She would have it hung above the fireplace, where, as she had heard, the long-nosed Mistress Stacy now reigned, staring inimicably down at her sons' debauches. There would be a new flavor to Stacys Holding. The men could keep to their hunting, if they willed. So much she would allow them. But the house, filled once more with the great of many lands, would blossom like a vast garden, centered around a lovely English rose.

Even as she looked, pursing her lips and rounding her lids to test temptation, she heard Gerald, and hand at breast, lips parted, hurried down, as if drawn by a power she hardly understood. But Gerald was not watching the staircase as she had expected.

He was standing with bowed head, before the fireplace, staring into the small fire. Clarissa retarded her entrance as long as she could, knowing it perfect; then, with a faint trace of annoyance, approached. Instead of rushing to meet her, he only raised his head, and regarded her soberly. Had she loved him, she would have read the hurt in his eyes. Instead, she found all this distinctly trying, and pouted softly, to indicate that this was not her notion of the correct approach to a matter of "most grave consequence." But to her annoyance, he did not see the pout. He was seeing not the waiting Clarissa, but the Clarissa he had so often dreamed of— Clarissa at Stacys Holding, running with a child's gaiety beside its brooks, wandering stately and pensive under its ancient trees. These things were a part of him, and Clarissa would have been their benediction.

But now the dream was broken. None of it would ever be. A long, shuddering sigh, almost a cry, escaped him.

"Clarissa— How much do you love me?"

This was so far from what she had expected that she stared at him, honest wonder in her eyes, before she recalled herself and dropped them.

"Sir— Oh, Sir, I beg you to forgive me, if I have been so unmaidenly—"

"Clarissa— Tell me, my dear love— How much?" Before she could answer, his hands clamped her shoulders. "Look at me," he ordered, so harshly she was frightened. "Tell me the truth. I love your reticence, but we are past it, now. Do you love me enough to give up all of this?"

The toss of his chin indicated the exquisite small room, the careful flowers and bibelots. She stared around incredulously. "All of this." The nasty, constricted little house, in a second-rate street—the skimping and saving and planning— But suddenly she thought she understood his meaning. The house was symbolic. He meant her privacy, her virginity. Thankfulness swept her. She had believed she must

educate him to his debt. Instead, he understood, and she could afford to be generous.

"This?" She laughed softly, with the right degree of tenderness. "Oh, my dear—do you really imagine this means anything to me next to—"

His mouth on hers broke the sentence, which would have ended "next to Stacys Holding," and he could not see the expression of her eyes, for the next moment his own were pressed against the cool curve of her throat.

"Darling— You do love me— Oh, God, I can't believe it, but I've prayed night and day, since that dawn when I first saw you. Clarissa, you don't know what my life has been. In your wonderful purity, you can't even imagine. But everything will be different now. You believe that, don't you, my darling?" He had drawn back a little, and was searching her eyes with a fevered insistence that made her vaguely uncomfortable. "We'll start all over again, Clarissa— Together. It will be—rather wonderful—to create a new world—" he paused, looking deep into her eyes, and she nodded, with relief as much as any other emotion. She was thankful she would not have to convince him that everything at Stacys Holding must be changed. She had not realized how easy things would be made for her, after all. But as she waited, and his words rushed on, she realized he was not speaking of Stacys Holding at all. "We shall be quite alone, at first, my darling. But that will not matter, having each other. That was why I wanted to be sure you loved me enough. I couldn't take you from England, unless—"

"Stop!" she cried. "What is it you are saying?"

He laughed softly, and capturing her hands, kissed them. "Beloved—it's not nearly as bad as I have made it seem. I made sure, before I came to you, that there are great estates there, that some day—" he stopped, before the growing horror in her face. "Clarissa," he said slowly, "I thought you understood, when you said you cared nothing for all this, next to our love."

"I didn't!" she screamed, and forced back her cry with a shaking hand at her lips. What if he were testing her? She had heard of such madness, in other men. She said more steadily, "Gerald— Tell me what you mean. Don't harass me this way! Oh, if you love me, tell me the truth!"

He had drawn back from her, and spoke almost coldly, his eyes level. "Very well. I have been granted a great tract in the Virginia Colony, with the command to occupy it. In short, I have been banished. But politely. Oh, most politely."

"Why?" Her white lips hardly formed the syllable.

"Because, my dear, a lady happened to love me—too well. I know that is hard for you to understand, but—"

"Stop!" she cried again, her color flaming. "Oh, my God— You and your women! Hard for me to understand? How can I help understanding? Is there a trull in London you haven't had?" She stopped, panting, before the astonishment in his face, shifted quickly, to regain her lost pose. "How dare you come here to tell me of your philanderings? Do you think I want to hear of your loves?"

"I had hoped you would want to hear—of one of them. The only one who can, or ever could, rightly, be called 'my love.'" He turned sharply, caught up his hat from the chair where he had laid it.

"Look!" she cried. "Your feather— What happened?"

He forced his set lips to grin, smoothing it almost fondly. "That, my dear is my *panache*—a bit draggled, possibly—but prouder than it has ever been. And now, with your permission—"

"Gerald—" she reached out, and laid her hand on his arm. He stared at it, his eyes cold under raised eyebrows. "Gerald, try to understand—"

"I understand perfectly."

"No, no. You don't. I can see in your face you don't. Think what it would have been—for me—"

"It would have been hell, my dear. I see that quite well.

But it would be hell for you at Stacys Holding, if you did not love me."

"Love! Love! How can you talk so about love, when all your life—"

His mouth wryed. "Possibly I speak as an expert."

"Gerald! You're jesting, now. How can you jest, with my heart breaking?" She paused, but he only stared. "Gerald, have you thought what would have happened to me, in a wilderness?"

"Naturally. I have thought of nothing else, since yesterday, when I heard. It would have been hard at first. But you would have been a little Queen, before you were old."

"Old." Her eyes widened, and she pressed the back of her hand to her shaking lips. But it was too late. She had spoken the word, always banned before. Age, her age, entered her consciousness, with all its ghastly retinue, the shrunken skin, the rheumy eyes, the swollen joints. "God!" she cried, and pressed her palms to her eyes. For a terrible moment she wondered if she were wise, whether, when age overtook her, she might not regret this hour. But surely, surely she had not guarded her young body so jealously for this—this grisly withering in a wilderness. "No!" she shuddered, and her hands fell from her eyes. "No— I cannot. You are cruel to ask it!" and turned and ran from him, stumbling on her flounces on the stairs.

XVIII

GERALD WAS halfway back to Stacys Holding when, like one recovering from a trance, he saw the rime on the fields, the clouds scudding across a black and moonless sky. Even the steely dawn, lying like a drawn sword on the horizon, reflected his mood, and he rode on with bitter gratitude.

Clarissa had rejected him. Not for any failure within himself, but for his loss of favor. If she had not loved him, he could have borne it as a man should, with resignation. But loving him, as he was convinced she did, and failing him because of a mess of pottage, a Royal smile, she had taken from him the one thing he had left: his faith in her own nobility. She had been quite right, of course. An incident, as he strode back toward the Rainbow, where Tanker awaited him, had proven Clarissa's good sense.

Head down, and lost in his own thought, he had heard the sound of riding, and turned to see a company of horsemen leave the New Artillery Gardens, King Charles's latest gift to the Society Practicing Arms. As they approached, the scarlet and white of their uniforms proclaimed them to be Sir John Suckling's regiment, outfitted at his own expense, with a poet's eye for luxury and color. It was the company he and Ajax had been invited to join, and he went forward, sweeping off his hat, and calling a greeting to the leader.

Suckling met his eyes full—and rode on.

From the corner, as he stood staring after them, floated back the leader's own song, lustily raised by his adoring followers:

“ . . . I have loved
Three whole days together,
And am like to love three more
If it prove fair weather.”

It had not proven fair weather for Gerald, and Suckling, close, now, to the Court, had smelt the changing wind.

He reached the Rainbow, and sent Tanker back to Stacys Holding, with word he would follow later. He must think, clearly and swiftly, before he saw Ajax.

He had told Ajax nothing, thinking he could soften the blow with the news that Clarissa would go with him. Ajax would grieve less, knowing his loneliness was to be relieved by such a wife.

He felt again the welling bitterness he had known in the first hour of her rejection, and put it from him, strongly. His thought now must be not of Clarissa, but of Ajax.

Hour after hour, as he sat staring before him, he wondered how he could tell Ajax, without loosing such a flood of resentment that the older Stacy, also, must be swept to destruction. Ajax would not fail him. Ajax would rush to Lambeth, to Whitehall itself, shouting his protests as he went, never contented until those mighty walls fell, though he himself were buried in the ruin.

Out of the night's turmoil, one clear thought arose. Ajax must not know, until it was too late for protests. To achieve that, Gerald must leave immediately. Suckling already knew, and Clarissa. Ajax might hear at any moment.

He jumped up, resolved, called for his mare, and rode off, for the last time, toward Stacys Holding, praying that Ajax might sleep too soundly to hear his coming.

But Ajax had not gone to bed. Tanker, returning, had told him enough to rob him of sleep. He sat in the main room, stark sober, wondering what Tanker had meant. Tanker had said, "He's got the look o' the noose on him." Ajax swore lustily the man was mad, and remained by the declining fire, waiting.

When Gerald entered, he met his eyes full. "Well? What is it?"

"Nothing. Why are you up?"

"That's for you to tell me. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I said. God's final Name, what's set you to nagging, at dawn?" His voice broke with the strain, and Ajax said sharply:

"Gerald! I never believed before you would imagine me a coward."

Gerald's breath caught, and the angry color drained from his face. Ajax knew—Ajax knew, already. Yet he must be cautious.

He said, "Very well, then. I've been a fool. Does that satisfy you?"

Ajax did not speak. Under his steady gaze, Gerald's eyes shifted, began moving around the room. He saw them reach his mother's crewel box, and the instant change: the hardness, the bitterness, the scorn, before Gerald wrenched them away with an effort so obvious it caught Ajax's heart, and began roaming from table to chair, touching them as if he renewed his acquaintance with each familiar object, or would fix it in his memory.

Ajax said at last, "We are all fools, at one time or another. What is it you have done?"

Gerald swung around. His eyes blazed. "Does it matter what I have done, since the accusation is clear?"

This was so far from what Ajax had expected it silenced him for some minutes. He said finally, "Can the accusation, whatever it is, be proven?"

"It cannot be disproven."

"But until you are proven guilty—"

"You are old fashioned, my poor Ajax. There is another style set now. An Englishman is guilty, with no chance to prove his innocence." He stopped. He had not meant to say so much. But Ajax was on his feet, and the look of his eyes and the set muscles of his face, warned Gerald he must continue, must tell more, and then make light of it, if his plan were to succeed. "I am accused of boarding a ship, without sailing papers. It is untrue, though it would have been true enough, in another quarter hour, at that."

"Accused of— But good God, what madness made you do such a thing? It is as foreign to your nature as—"

"It is. But it was not madness. It was a plot. A very clear, quite calm plot. A lady sent me on an errand, if you would know."

"What lady?"

Gerald's eyebrows rose, and a small smile touched his lips. "Does it matter? You should know as well as most that one lady is like another, and all as faithless as their sisters." His eyes had returned to the crewel box, now. In a stride, he reached it, and with a swift gesture flung it open, and tossed the blue rosette into the fire.

"No!" Ajax cried, "No! Good God, not— Not all ladies—"

Gerald turned back, dusting his fingers lightly, laughing so softly Ajax's blood chilled.

"No," he said gently, "You are quite right. Not all ladies. Do you remember Matilda? She's a waterfront harlot, now. And I strongly suspect she has assisted more than once at murder, with a delicate feminine touch. But she had pride to make her refuse my gold when she was hungry, and courage to risk her life to save mine. You are quite right, my dear brother. Not all ladies are vile."

He strode toward the door, but as he reached the threshold, Ajax cried, "Stop!" There was such anguish in the word that Gerald spun around, recalled to a realization of the moment, of his intention.

"God's final Name! Don't look like that. The matter is closed." He stopped, steadying his voice. Closed. How utterly, how hopelessly closed! "Ajax," he exclaimed, and returned, grasping his brother's shoulder. "You are to give it no further thought. Do you understand? The matter is of no such great importance. The quarrel is mine—and it is closed."

"Look!" Ajax's arm flung out, pointing to the staircase oriel where the morning sun welled red as blood across the Stacy crest: Two right hands, clasping a single javelin, and

below, the motto: "In Honor, Strength." "You are my brother," he said. "Your honor is my strength. We are one."

"Nol" Gerald's cry was sharp, but Ajax was sweeping on. "I tell you—"

"You need tell me only this: What proof have you this was a plot?"

"Too much. She had no brother, there was no ship at the wharf named, so that rushing bewildered from one to the other I could not be mistaken by the spy set to follow me—oh, there was proof enough, have no fear. Believe me, I did not want to credit it, having at one time enjoyed a certain affection for the lady. But even my vanity could not reject the facts. So—let us leave it at that. The matter is painful to me, even in retrospect." He forced a wry smile, and clapped Ajax's shoulder. "I insist that you forget the entire affair. I am no longer a child, being but two years your junior, though you have a face longer than a Covenantant. And speaking of such matters, did you know Suckling's regiment is all equipped and ready?"

"I knew. God help the pretty parakeets."

"But you don't think—"

"I think there is a force aroused that few dare measure and none can quell." He stopped, his level eyes challenging. "In short, I think, my dear Gerald, that too many free men have been 'found guilty, with no chance to prove their innocence.'"

XIX

THE FOOL crept through the spring garden, making his twisted way under hedge and bramble, chattering to a field-mouse and chirruping to a wren, so expertly, with such an exquisite companionship, that they paused, and cocked their heads, and answered tranquilly. It warmed him to have their confidence, and he needed that. His errand was a cold one, for a spring evening.

He had come upon Gerald by chance, that morning. He had been strolling along the waterfront, conversing with the swans, as he had a hundred times in the sorrowful months since his dismissal. A shadow had fallen across his path, and he had looked up, and recognized him, suddenly.

Gerald was hurrying along, with bowed head, too deep in his thought, too driven by his pain, to recognize anyone. When Archy spoke to him, he started, and then cried out like an awakening dreamer.

"You! Thank God— You can do it. And you will." It had been more a question than a statement, and the Fool, trained in the hearts of men, detected the pain in it.

"I will, Master. I will make your sorrow a jest so gay you will choke on laughter, and so be rid of trouble forever!"

"You can't do that, poor Fool," Gerald said. He was scrawling a line on a paper, the whittled charcoal spluttering. "Even you cannot do that."

The Fool, watching, was amazed. Few gentlemen wrote so swiftly; none carried with them the implements of writing, trusting instead to street-corner scribes. Gerald must have expected to send this message. Moreover it must be a secret one, that he wrote it himself.

He folded it hastily, and put it in Armstrong's hand. It was then the Fool knew how cold a thing it was.

"Take it to my brother, in Buckinghamshire—at Stacys Holding. He will reward you. Here," and he thrust a gold piece in the withered hand, and hurried on.

The Fool stood for a minute longer watching him, until he came to the wharves, and mingled with the crowds. He knew, then, why the message was so cold, and why Gerald wore so thick a cape.

It was early evening when he came to Stacys Holding. He left his nag at the gates, and came on slowly, taking comfort from bird and tree and woodthing, until he saw Ajax.

Ajax was standing beside Gerald's mare. His arm was flung over her neck, his cheek against her. The Fool knew it was Ajax, for never in his life had he seen any man so lonely. And he knew the letter in his jerkin held no cure for loneliness. He had kept it against his body the journey through, yet it remained cold against his skin. However he sweated with haste or fear, the letter remained cold. As cold as death.

He crept out of the hedge, and stood staring at Ajax with pitiful bright eyes like a wild thing's, and Ajax felt the look, and glanced up, recognizing the laughing face made famous by its tears.

"What is it?" he said gently, "What has brought you so far from home?"

"Home?" the Fool repeated, and the word became significant, tearing Ajax from his own webbing thoughts, forcing his naked attention. "Home, Master? Nay, God loves a wandering people, for has He not marked us with His special favor in the person of His Grace of Canterbury, who has forthwith turned us into a race of wanderers second only to the Jews? For which of us can surely say whether he will remain in the land of his fathers for another dawn, much less leave his lands to his son, or grandson? Nay, Master, no Englishman has surety of a home, save for the Heavenly Mansions—and even they are in lease to Satan!"

The very lightness of his accustomed Fool's tone gave

the words heaviness. The conviction held Ajax there was more here than the twenty lashes which had startled the whole kingdom. There was more here than hate, or fear. There was a queer, twisted pride, that made them brothers, because they were both English born.

Strange—he had never thought of Armstrong as a man before. Now, he discovered in that distorted form an upright strength beyond the gift of flesh.

He said sharply, "Why are you here?" and saw in the pitiful gray face a change, like the very portent of death. "Quick! Why?"

The Fool put finger to side of nose, unable to shake off the manners of long custom. "I bear a letter, Master—but put on your gloves ere you take it."

"My gloves?"

"Aye. Embroider them if you will, but mind that they are thick. Look, Master. It is cold!" He handed it to him, blowing on his fingers.

Ajax forced a laugh, though the Fool's words and the writing on the letter had struck a strange chill through him. "You are more daft than before. Look. This is from my brother, and no note could be warmer to welcome." He turned, but as Archy still waited, recalled himself and gave him gold. Still the other did not move, and he exclaimed, "Why do you stay?"

The Fool was turning the coin over and over, squinting at it. "Gold," he murmured, "is a cold metal, Master. Never is it warmed with blood, like honest steel, nor with good China tea, like the Guild silver. Nay, I care little for it. But I will keep it!" he added with mock haste and alarm, "Oh, I will keep it—for it is a good symbol of the letter."

"Keep it, then, and go."

"Nay, Master, for putting this in your hands is only half my errand. For the rest, I must stay nearby, to warm you."

Ajax frowned. The man's insistence was more chilling than the prescience he had felt since Gerald's going. In the

long hours since he had discovered his brother's room empty, he had fought as unreasonable the fear that held him. Now, the Fool's unreason had given it substance.

"Read, Master," Archy said. "Read while there is yet light. The darkness comes too soon."

Ajax opened the paper, read and reread. Gerald was gone. Gerald would never again stand where he was standing, never again shout his arrival, his laughter ringing out for the sheer joy of homecoming.

"God!" The cry held all of anguish, all of prayer.

"Master," the Fool cried, "See, Master. Here is my shoulder. Grasp it well. Aii!"

Ajax released him sharply. "I have hurt you!"

"Nay, Master, would you think your grasp more powerful than a king's? I recall poor Jamie, on the occasion of the Gunpowder Treason, left me bearing the Royal purple on my shoulder for a month. Alas, poor wandering shade, what does he now, shuttlecocking between Peter and Satan, with no Fool to hold to? Wise men must lean on Fools, in a crisis, Master, and the wisest know it best." He paused, turning up a beady eye, cocking his now combless head, as if he still wore the crest of the dawn. But no answer came from Ajax Stacy's thinned and stiffened lips.

Ajax knew in that moment he could no longer "sit at home, air no opinion, and wait for the storm to pass." The storm had swept through Stacys Holding, and struck one of the right hands from the javelin. But the other still gripped it, and before God, that single grip should suffice.

He turned to the Fool, and the other nodded swiftly, marking the level eyes, the set jaw.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Where the night and the tide changed," said the Fool, "and now that heat has come into you, I may be gone!"

"But it is dark—"

"The surest sign the light will come, Master. I have never known yet a night that failed to herald day."

"Come back!" Ajax called to the quivering bushes, and heard a voice like a reed in the wind, answering.

"I shall be back when I have gathered thistledown from the wind, and answers from the wise. Have no fear, Master. But remember that you wear your gloves against the cold!"

XX

THE FERRYMAN between Lambeth and Whitehall had grown to know well the lean brown face, shaped to laughter but mortgaged to severity, the full mouth thinned by waiting days and sleepless nights, the ruddy eyes whose dancing lights had sharpened with determination and pain. He had a score such excellent customers, gentlemen, who still believed a just case would get fair hearing, that the Crown might yet recall its ancient responsibilities, the Church its old time mercy.

The ferryman knew better, but he took their sixpences, and held his peace. Who was he to instruct gentlemen in their own traditional province? But he could not help marveling at the handicaps of good breeding. The gentlemen continued to shuttle back and forth, teeth clamped over their complaints, holding their heads high and smiling with stiff lips, and only the burning in their thwarted eyes betraying them.

But the common people—ah, there was another matter. They were not loath to admit their true feelings. Hardly a day was passing without an uprising, without a stone, well wrapped within a broadside, crashing through a window of Raby, or Lambeth, or Whitehall itself. But old Sir Henry Vane, who had owned Raby before Charles stole it to reward Black Tom Wentworth for his murderous schemes, did no stone tossing. He only wrapped himself the tighter in silence, and drew further from the Court, and took notes of such matters as might prove useful in days to come.

For the most part, gentlemen were like that, truer to their loyalties than to their desires. He guessed that Ajax was no exception, but as the days became weeks, there had been a change in him, which even the ferryman recognized as heralding a crisis. And when, one April morning, he gave

him a goldpiece, and muttered with a queer, grim smile, "Pray for me," the ferryman knew he would not come that way again.

Ajax knew it, too. He knew that he must see Laud today, and that, seeing him, neither the Star Chamber nor the High Commission nor the Tower itself would silence the cry that had been growing within him since Gerald's banishment. His voice had merged with the mighty voice of England.

And Laud knew it. When Ajax strode into the audience room, his erect carriage and bold step and level eyes held no hint of the fawning appeasement characteristic of the Archbishop's petitioners. When he looked at Laud, he looked at the son of the little Reading tailor, who had grown so great that mighty England was choking on his puffed-up pretensions.

The Archbishop kept him standing there for a long time, without asking his business. When Ajax remained, not alone silent but unmoving, it was William of Canterbury who discovered himself fidgeting with his lawn sleeve ruffles, and conquered his always quick temper with difficulty.

"I have your petition, Master Stacy," he said.

Ajax's eyes did not falter. "My *protest*, Your Grace, that my brother was so ill used."

Laud's eyebrows peaked. "Ill used? That is a strange description for a grant of one of the finest tracts in the Virginia Colony."

The rancor in his tone proved which of Charles' councilors had opposed the Royal "generosity." It was what Ajax had suspected, and he made no attempt to conceal his resentment.

"Your Grace is evidently ignorant that since the days of King John it has been uncustomary to banish an English freeman without trial."

Laud leaned forward. He could not credit that he had heard aright. This man had in a sentence not only rebuked

him for his brother's plight, but, forgetting who made the Law, had accused him of ignorance of it, and of injustice not only to his brother, but scores of others. Was it possible he did not know that the man he chid so recklessly could pinch out the breath behind his hot words? For a moment, Laud was tempted, but the reflection that death was a simple thing, and soon over, stayed him, though he assured himself instantly that the reason for his "mercy" was a conviction Ajax was not sane. For such, there were the vaults and chains of Bedlam Hospital. But first—first, he must prove it. There had been too much murmuring of late over his decisions. He must see that one thing led to another. He said, "You have not considered a trial might bring to light charges making such generosity as His Majesty desired impossible."

"A trial," said Ajax stubbornly, "may prove a man innocent, Your Grace."

The Archbishop waved a delicate hand. "Alas, it so seldom does," he murmured. "In the appallingly great majority of trials before our High Commission— But no matter. It pains me to reflect on the widespread evils of our frail race. So you still think that your brother was innocent?"

"I know that he was."

Laud's eyes brightened. "Indeed? How? Were you there?"

"Your Grace knows very well that I was not."

"How? *I* was not there, certainly." He allowed a flash of grim humor to touch his lips and eyes.

"Because you had set a spy, knowing my brother had not the wit to know it for a plot."

Laud's eyes flickered. From time to time, he had wondered how everything had occurred so smoothly, on that evening six weeks before. But so many things did occur smoothly, in his service. And to remove the lover of Charlotte Ponsonby, who had mocked him openly, was surely his service. But now another Stacy had appeared to plague him. And this one, as the past quarter hour had proven, was too dangerous to ignore.

He said, "Do you accuse me of plotting, Master Stacy?"

"That I do not know. I know that there was a plot, and that without your authority—"

"Silence!" Laud's hand smote the table. "You are not speaking to the draper's son of Reading, Master Stacy. You are speaking to the First Minister of the Crown. It is high time you were taught humility before your betters."

The blood flowed back from Ajax's face, but he was powerless to curb the sneer on his tongue. "Which the Church will doubtless teach me, for my soul's good, through His Grace of Canterbury."

Laud did not answer. He was speaking in a swift undertone to an attendant. Ajax caught the last words, ". . . insufficient to cripple him, but enough for an opening whereby his false pride may escape, and a decent respect enter in. Then let him go."

Ajax found himself between guards, moving swiftly through dark and devious passages, down, always down, until at last he stood in an open court. Here groans and cries of defiance, steadfast prayers and maniacal laughter silenced birdsongs, and the smell of blood, and burnt flesh as the branding iron hissed on cheek or forehead, blotted the sweet scent of April.

At the edge of the court, past the slight wall which hid the rest from the curious, there was a smaller enclosure. Here were the pillories and whipping posts, where a sad and motley company waited release. Some were half fainting with the heat and loss of blood, some remained as stiff and defiant as though the wood and iron were powerless against such sturdy courage. In the street outside, the crowd shifted and eddied, changing from minute to minute: the common people of London snatching such small amusement as they might, to spice their dreary hours. Among them, vendors of rotted fruit and vegetables, bought for a pittance or salvaged from the offal heap, did a thriving business, while those with sure aim were presented with the choicest bits, for the

pleasure of the crowd, and rewarded with cheers and howls and catcalls when a shot struck home.

Through this barrage of mockery they led Ajax, his brown, stripped body glistening with the sweat of his ordeal. He knew now what his punishment would be: he, Ajax Stacy, would learn "humility" at the whipping post.

The first blow fell, so heavily it forced a little incredulous gasp between his clenched teeth, and he staggered. He struck his feet wide apart and the second blow fell. The third. The fourth. They were coming faster now, the lash sucking freely at his flowing blood. He had lost count, and the bright day was blackening, but he forced his head up, and stifled his cry. He did not realize that the crowd outside had grown, and that there was a strange silence over it. He did not even realize that a carriage had approached, and come to a quiet halt a little removed.

It was not Laud's intention to be observed. He was there to observe, to enjoy a secret pleasure in this aristocrat's humbling before the tailor's son. But looking at the crowd, he discovered something that he did not like. There was a quiet, a sullenness about it. Ajax's courage had quelled their ribaldries. Deep in their English hearts, they resented this unwonted cruelty to a man with the guts to endure it. When His Grace leaned out, and they saw him, they drew back. They did not break silence, but their faces were an accusation.

Laud knew what a poor foundation it would be for his plan if the crowd were to make this man a hero. He had expected that Ajax Stacy would lose his temper, rage, and shout for revenge. Like those of lowly breeding of every age and land, he had not calculated on the fortitude of aristocracy, nor had he realized that it was this quality that had gathered the humble to the banners of the mighty since the world began.

He was already having sufficient difficulty with a common Puritan lecturer, a fellow named Quartermayn. He had been

hailed before the High Commission, and had had the effrontery to refuse to take the oath, confounding the Court out of Holy Writ, a procedure which had left them too addled to recommend the usual cure for stubbornness. And what had been the outcome? The Archbishop had received fair warning that when Quartermayn was again called, a few days hence, he would not stand alone, but with a mighty gathering of Puritans to bear him company. If a man like Quartermayn could accomplish so much, what could not Ajax Stacy do, once he had captured the people's imagination?

Laud's one idea now was to get him out of sight, where that strong desecrated body, that suffering and patient face, might not inflame an uprising. There had been too many uprisings, already. And the memory of a crowd, as Laud knew too well, was inconveniently tenacious. He leaned forward, and waved. The sweating whippers straightened. The blows ceased. Ajax felt himself half lifted and half dragged from darkness into greater darkness.

It was past midnight when he reached the Rainbow. What instinct had led him to this place where he and Gerald had so often drunk their coffee in leisured elegance, he did not know. He only knew that when James Farr saw him, he ran out, and lifted him from his horse, very gently.

He had been a barber formerly, and so knew something of surgery. He had carried Ajax upstairs, having meantime the wit to keep silence. The bar girl came after a while with warm wine and water, and they sponged Ajax's back, and poured oil over his stripes. He felt their kindly touch, but did not see the keenness of the glance they exchanged, as they worked.

He had fallen into a doze, when a small sound awakened him, and he met the startled, overbright eyes of a lad, who bore brandy in shaking hands. At once, he realized that his plight had been discussed, that they had marveled, as he did

himself, that a Stacy should have been flogged like a chimney-sweep, for the boy said immediately:

"Please, Your Honor— You *are* Master Stacy?"

"I am."

"I'm the ostler's boy, Your Honor, but they said I might serve you myself inasmuch as your brother— You are Master Stacy of Buckingham?"

"I am. And what of my brother?" Ajax pulled himself to his elbow, careless now of the pain that swept him. This boy knew Gerald. This boy might even have seen him, after he did. "Speak, can't you? What of him?"

"He saved my life, Your Honor. I was in Buckingham, then, with Master Milton, and the farm lads would have stoned me, but that your brother— But he told you, doubtless."

"No," said Ajax, "No. He did not tell me."

"And after, Sir, when Master Milton's lady ill-used me for that I was Separatist, he got me in here. And whenever after he came here unaccompanied, he never failed to summon me in from the stable to sing psalm tunes whilst he drank. Would you like me to sing to you, now, Sir?"

"Good God, no," Ajax roared. The picture of Gerald, drinking and beating time, while this earnest sprout of a roundhead chanted psalm tunes, forced him to grin through his pain.

"Sir—if there is aught I can do—"

"There is not."

"Sir, Your Honor—" he stood plucking at the corner of the counterpane, his narrow face flushed, his eyes downcast. "I know of your trouble, Your Honor."

Ajax tossed a quick look at him. "And my brother's, too, doubtless."

"I heard he is gone to the Colonies. But that is not always ill. I know the master of the *Griffin*, in the service of the Bay Company, and—"

"My brother," Ajax interrupted, "was banished."

"Banished!"

"And that is why I am here."

The boy had come to his side, now; his narrow shoulders were thrown back, his eyes flashing. "Then are we no longer helpless!" he cried, "For they who destroy the friend of the fatherless and the afflicted shall surely perish! Our God is a Rock of defense and a Fortress about the weak, and they who call upon Him shall be heard. Though the Kings of the earth are joined against them, yet shall they stand."

Vibrant with courage and faith, the words struck through Ajax like a battlecry. Vane had broken the ground, and Milton had prepared it; but in that moment, the first green shoot sprang up. He reached out and took the boy's hand.

"You have given me the strength I lacked. I thought for a little I was weak and alone, but you, my young Samuel, have shamed my unbelief. I had forgotten on what small things history hinges. Did you know that the price of English freedom was once fixed at a groat?"

"A groat, Your Honor?"

"The smallest of all coins. But because one woman refused to pay it in an unjust tax, a great company flowed together. They call it Wat Tyler's Rebellion, now, in learned books. But what it was, was a great protest of all people, and the company, gathered as they marched, went to— Good God Almighty, boy—they went to Southwark—to Lambeth! Now is that not a strange coincidence?"

"But at Lambeth, Your Honor? What occurred at Lambeth?"

"Exactly what we might expect, you and I. Old Simon Sudbury, our friend Laud's predecessor, repulsed them. But then—then—they went to Richard himself."

The boy shrank back, eyes round with wonder. When he could no longer bear the suspense, he said timorously, "And then, Your Honor? Then—?"

Ajax smiled, and there was something in the smile that prickled the lad's skin.

"The King," said Ajax quietly, "preferred his people to his Lord Chancellor. And therein lies a matter that bears thinking on."

XXI

"When Adam delved,
And Eve span—"

LOUDER AND LOUDER, the ancient rhyme of Wat Tyler's Rebellion swelled in the London streets. Ajax could hear it, even in the closed cellar of the vintners, undertoning his own impassioned words. A sort of tune had grown around it these past weeks, a chant in march time, persistent and ominous. Once more it paced marching feet, as it had centuries before. It moved along dark alleyways, marking those insolent unhurried footbeats; it lingered after they had passed, and the proud high walls of Lambeth and Westminster shook with it, and the cobbles of Billingsgate and Queenshyte echoed it, and suddenly from them all swept back its triumphant climax:

"Who was then
The gentleman?"

Tonight, Ajax could hear it everywhere. It was in the distance, and echoed near by. He marveled how few weeks it was since he had first quoted it to a little knot of silent, hard-faced men, gathered around him in the Rainbow courtyard, the night after his flogging. Those men had gone, and others had taken their places. Weak as he had been, he had felt a new strength surge through him, a strength beyond the value of the blood he had lost, of the ease with which he could move arm or leg. He had stayed in London three days, that time, until he could sit a horse, and had ridden back to Stacys Holding a changed man.

He remembered now the doubts that had assailed him on that homeward journey. He had wondered whether the words

that he had spoken would bear any fruit other than further persecution. And like an answer, he had caught up with two gentlemen, riding like himself away from London.

He would have passed them with a nod, so deep was he in his own thoughts, but they called him to wait, and when they had overtaken him, wasted no time in preamble.

"Sir, we know neither your loyalties nor your opinions, but we are come to advise all our Countrymen of a matter of grave import whatever their adherence."

The gentleman stopped. Looking in his direct, challenging eyes, Ajax felt a swift liking for him, though he realized how short a time before he would have marked him instantly as a Puritan, and so something of a fanatic bore.

Now, he smiled half apologetically. "I think, Sirs, that my views may not be too greatly opposed to your own."

The other gentleman said quickly, "At bottom, the views of all Englishmen must agree in this matter, though some have not given it the thought to recognize its importance, and some have not viewed it clearly, looking still 'through a glass, darkly,' being deceived by prejudice, or fine words. My name, Sir, is Pym. John Pym. And this gentleman, Sir, is Master John Hampden, of whom you may have heard."

"I've heard of you both," Ajax smiled. "I am Ajax Stacy, a friend of Harry Vane's."

"Ah," Pym's face lightened. "Then you do not need instruction in the matter at hand. You already recognize the importance of any Parliament convened at this time. We shall need strong men, Master Stacy—we shall need men whose strength is measured by a standard more permanent than that of human flesh. We must build today, if our children are to dwell upon a foundation firmer than their father's rotting bones. It is because we recognize this fact, and know that only while a nation stands firm in the strength of the Lord is it secure, that Master Hampden and myself have taken upon ourselves to ride throughout England and instruct our countrymen in certain matters known only to

members of the House, and cloaked by those in authority, so that when our people return a new Parliament they may do so in wisdom and in courage."

"A free people," Hampden said quickly, "can maintain its freedom only by being ready at all times to yield to imprisonment. It is a strange contradiction, but it is true. The freedom of the spirit is often best maintained by the shackling of the flesh. 'He who would save his life shall lose it.'"

Ajax remembered that now. In the darkness of the cellar, among the mighty, illiterate apprentices to whom he spoke, he remembered the two frail gentlemen, willing to risk their lives, to save them, and a sense of unity with them surged through him, unity not alone with men alive, but of all ages, all nations, "of good will."

The men he had first spoken to had gone, and others had taken their places. From the courtyard of the Rainbow to the walls of Lambeth, the old verse had spread. Tonight, he knew his work was done. With Pym and Hampden and a score of others, he had prepared the People of England to determine who should rule—Parliament, or William Canterbury and Black Tom.

It had been difficult for Ajax to meet the viewpoint of the men among whom he must work. He had been trained to think in centuries, but they saw everything in terms of their immediate needs or ills. It was Laud himself who welded them at last, by a chance phrase.

The Parliament Pym and Hampden had so earnestly plead for had withstood command and appeal and threat, and finally, impatient with its continued stubbornness, Laud had called it "peevish." When Ajax heard it, he flung up his head, and laughed aloud, knowing that God had delivered the enemy into his hand.

"Since when has any ruler dared call Parliament 'peevish,' for not groveling to his will? Parliament is the People of England, whether of high or low degree. Can a whole race be 'peevish,' if it fails to bleat an echo to one

man's will? How must a man be bloated with power to believe his voice can silence the voice of a whole nation! By what means is he to silence it? Is Wentworth to bring his butcheries to England?"

"Ahhh," they groaned, and beat their fists on empty wine-casks, "Black Tom! Black Tom Tyrant!"

"Black Tom Tyrant, indeed!" Ajax cried above the din, "But Irish blood is a slimy foothold for his kind. And now he turns north he finds the ground of Scotland a stony rooting place for tyranny."

"But the stones shall break silence!" a man cried, "Aye, it is written, the stones shall break silence!"

"The stones *have* broken silence. But more, they have broken the skulls of our Army of Iniquity! That is why we must raise another army to slaughter freemen. That is why Black Tom and Little Will must have our money: for an army to be paid by your sweat to spill your brothers' blood! But by the Grace of God and Parliament, they shall not have it. This Parliament is 'peevish,' forsooth: it dares refuse Tom's Will!" Groans and laughter greeted the meager jest, and he silenced them suddenly with a stern hand. "Make no mistake. This is no small matter. The smallness of the word reflects Laud's own pettiness, not the issue in hand. When the head of a free people mocks their representatives, sneering at their authority and reviling their stand, then I say to you that people is no longer free. What is there in Magna Carta that names it treason to disagree with Little Will? Where does the Bill of Rights call the citizen a traitor who dares question Laud's decision? How is the tailor's son become so great that he shall stand between us and our King? Let him beware how he would lash the cub for puling, and mark the lion crouched in the shadow."

"Listen, Master!" one of them cried, "Listen— The lion—"

He jumped from the counter, threading his way among the great casks, and flung up the heavy door. The torchlight streamed down into the cellar, swelling the bulbous shadows

of the casks, glinting from the bottoms of the bottles thrust in their caves along the walls. It picked out their stern faces and clenched fists, and played at last on Ajax's naked back, laced with the stripes of his flogging. They were his passport to their company. Sooner or later, they always demanded sight of them.

"Listen! The lion! The lion!"

"When Adam delved
And Eve span—"

Nearer, nearer it was coming. The Apprentices of the Most Worshipful Company of Vintners pulled in their wide belts, and flexed their arms, and roared back,

"Who was then
The gentleman?"

and swung Ajax to their shoulders, and tramped up, up into the street.

There was great tumult and confusion in London that May night. From every shop and warehouse, from the shadow of the wharves and shelter of tombs, dark figures hastened, timorous, or swaggering to hide their fear, but becoming suddenly bold when they saw how mighty was the company they had joined.

Laud heard them coming. He went to the window, and looked out. All he could see was the sudden swift lightning splitting the dark sky. He did not like it. It seemed too like an omen. But looking down, he saw a slow dark mass, like a tide, rolling. It was singing, and straining his ears, he heard the words, and—peasant grown too great—drew back horrified, as at a blasphemy.

But Ajax Stacy, gentleman before the Conquest, sang as lustily as the rest, secure that at last his feet were set firm on the rock of liberty.

They had set him down, and he went forward with the joyous knowledge that after tonight he was free. He had

helped to start a thing so vast that God alone might compass its full end. He had avenged Gerald, with his part in this night's business. Tomorrow, he would be free to leave England.

He knew it, now, quite suddenly, though he had not faced the decision before. For many months, he had been aware that his England, the England his people had brought forth in anguish and nurtured with their blood and tears, the England he loved, was no more. It might rise again, like a Phoenix, from the ashes of despotism, and to that end, he had suffered in body and toiled in spirit. But he could not settle again into the old ways. Whatever came of this night, he knew now that his future lay in shaping a new land, with strength and courage, that his children might be born in freedom, as he had been.

He was so deep in his own thoughts, that he was startled to feel a hand plucking his arm, and more startled when he failed to see who owned it. It was only when he heard the urgent voice of the young ostler of the Rainbow that he looked down, and discovered the thin white face, wedged between the shoulders of two bullies. How had the lad discovered him and wormed his way through to his side? Who else had seen him?

"Good God," he exclaimed, "What brought you here?"

"The arm of the Lord," the lad said stoutly. "It went before, and opened a way." Ajax suppressed a desire to say that from the looks of the boy it might have been a wider one, and the lad hurried on. "I saw Your Honor passing the Rainbow, high as you were, and— There's a horse in the alley, if—"

He stopped. A sudden hush had fallen on the crowd. They had come to Lambeth.

One of the Archbishop's guards appeared on a balcony. He waved a hand at them, as if he shooed a fly, and started to speak. The silence broke. The guard discovered it was not a fly. It was a lion crouched there. And the lion was

roaring. Laud came out—and hurried in again. He had a more dignified way of answering that roar than striving to shout above it.

There was a spurt of flame, the boom of a cannon. The instant of awed silence broke in screams of agony, in cries of hatred and defiance, and warning as those in front fell back upon their fellows, and men were trampled or crushed between their friends. The cannon boomed again, the gates opened, the guards rushed out, pikes and halberds glittering.

A few managed to escape. Those too near were spitted like fowl or flung inside for trial and leisurely condemnation. In the confusion, Ajax grabbed the boy, and dragged him into a side street, rushing blindly through the darkness, until the lad's yell stopped him.

"Quick, Your Honor— In here!" He dove into a black alley like a rat into a hole, and Ajax followed, cursing. There was the sound of a horse snorting and plunging, terrified at the clamor outside. "Take him. Get home, Your Honor. Too many saw you, like I did."

"But you?" cried Ajax. "What of you?"

"No one would suspect me. I brought him for you. Go home." He was untying the animal, struggling to calm it, talking in great sobbing gulps as he regained his breath.

"But whose animal is it? You stole it—didn't you?"

"I—borrowed it, from the stable. And none the wiser. Bring it back, if you will. But oh, Your Honor, Sir, if you are wise—forgiving my impudence— Your Honor, Sir, the *Griffin* sails come Saturday dawn."

Ajax caught his breath, and loosed it slowly. "No. I could not get the papers by then. It would not be wise to try so soon after this."

"It's soon or never, Sir. Don't you understand? I know the Captain. He—"

"No! You can't do this. Good God, they'd flay you alive!"

The boy laughed quickly, excitedly. "There's no danger to me, I swear it, Your Honor. But if there were— Oh, Your

Honor, when you reach the Colony, tell your brother I did not forget what he said: that I owed my life to a feather and a crimping pin, the devil's tools as ever were, and me fighting to be free of them from that hour to this. And now, Your Honor, Sir, will you go?"

Ajax laughed. "God help you, if it will save you from Hell fire— Yes," he said, and spurred into the night.

XXII

IT WAS edging dawn when Ajax reached home. He was cold and stiff, for he had worn only a pair of plain breeches and a shirt for that night's business, and the cloak someone had thrown around him as they carried him up out of the vintner's cellar had blown back with the wind of his riding. But he knew that with his promise to the boy he had put away self-coddling.

He must see Vane, and tell him his decision. No one else should know. The matter was too dangerous to trust to others, for their own sake.

He hurried to the great, stone-flagged kitchen, found a round loaf and a joint and a crock of apple butter. These, with the country cider the servants enjoyed, he ate, standing. The hour and action filled him with such nostalgia for Gerald, who had shared these secret feasts with him in boyhood, that his throat ached, and his eyes smarted. He wished he had not told Dolly he would be absent from Stacys Holding that night. Whatever the hour, she would have waited, nodding and dozing, and refusing to admit she had so much as "batted an eye." But when he heard her moving in the buttery, and realized that she was up, that her day had started, he crept off, knowing he would be helpless against her sharp eyes and questions, once she saw his plight.

Dolly did not know of the flogging. He had stayed for three days at the Rainbow, until he could walk with only a slight stiffness. She might have guessed there was more to his absences than in the carefree past; but if she did, she never mentioned her doubts.

In his own room, he flung the clothing he had on in a corner of the *armoire*, where she would not discover it till Saturday.

Saturday. Saturday, when he left England. When he left Stacy's Holding.

Tonight would be the last night a Stacy would sleep in this house, unless his children, or Gerald's— He pulled on his breeches, savagely.

That was why he was going, he told himself, fiercely, striving to conquer the grief that held him. For his children. He would marry. He would marry some staunch and upright lady, with clear calm eyes and a body strong for bearing. There would be such in the new land. Ladies who had no look of Clarissa, ladies who would scorn her pretty treacherous ways. He told himself he gloried in his salvation from her power over him, and covered his face with his hands, his great shoulders shaking.

In the storm of his emotion, he did not hear Dolly Wimple climbing the stairs slowly, moving along the hall. He did not know that she was there staring at the telltale scars on his back until her moan, more terrible than it was muffled, flung him about. They looked in each other's eyes, and then he reached out and clasped her arm, and led her to a chair.

"Dolly," he said gently. "It's all right—now. It—"

But she had struggled to her feet, with a cry. "It is not all right and it will never be, and in your breaking heart you know it! Ah, Almighty God, look on us in our misery, and have mercy! How long, oh, Lord, how long?"

"Dolly— Be still, and listen to me. It is quite well now. And they who did it—"

"'They'! 'They'! What talk is that? What has come on you you are afraid to name them to their face—"

"I was not afraid, Dolly. You may be very sure of that. I have been a fool and a wastrel, but I have not disgraced you. I have not been afraid.—What brought you up here?"

"I did not know you were returned. I came up to red the room." She stopped, sudden recollection in her face. "There's a body below to see you. I would have sent her off, but in the end— In the end, I told her she could wait."

"But, my God, I can't see anyone. What'd I do, seeing a woman—this way?"

"You have a shirt, haven't you?"

"But—"

"There's no but to it. You'd best see her."

Her face and tone were grim. And after all, it might be well to be seen here, thus early, by an outsider, in case some rumor overtook him.

He dressed hastily, and entered the main room frowning.

A woman stood staring at the portrait of Mistress Stacy. She was unaware of his coming, and as she turned, he was startled to find she was not alone. A little boy, thin and pitifully ill clad, was snuggled so close, clinging in the folds of her skirt, that he had been invisible. His face was hidden, but suddenly Ajax recognized the woman. It was Matilda, Gerald's wench, who had run off to marry the baker's apprentice.

She had been pink and plump as a Rubens, then, but her flesh was sparse, now, and pasty pale, and gray lines of fatigue pulled at her face. She took an uncertain step forward, and the child at her skirt slumped to the floor.

Ajax said, "Gerald is no longer here."

"I know. I may well have known ere you did."

Ajax remembered then what Gerald had said of this woman—that she, alone, had redeemed her sex. His face softened. "He told me what you had done for him. You are a brave woman, Matilda. A brave woman—and a kind one."

Her look lightened, but she pressed her lips together as she had that night when Gerald praised her. "Praise be he told you," she said at last. "I feared—he might not have. I need your help. No!" she said sharply, as he made an involuntary gesture toward his purse. "But— We're in one kettle o' fish, now, Gerald and me. Have you heard what befell last night? They marched on Lambeth—all the prentices of London—and my husband with the rest." Her face worked, and she stiffened it with an effort. Coming from

that mask, her words took on new awe. "I heard them for hours before they passed our place. Like wind in the distance, they were. I always hated wind, lying in bed above here. Screaming and moaning like a soul in Purgatory, and omeneing what was to come, doubtless."

"Don't!— We have suffered, too, Matilda. Tell me why you came, but—be brief."

"Why I came? This is why I came—all of it. Walt was up and away with no word to me, as they passed our door. I lay listening, not daring to think—and then I heard it. They'd marched on Lambeth, thinking he'd listen, and the man of God had turned his cannon on them. The lucky ones died." She drew a long shuddering breath. "Some escaped, but there's never a mousehole where they'll find safe hiding. One ran in to me, and I left him there on the floor screaming, sliced half in two. And as I came—I saw another—or part of him. A lad named Benstead, a friend of Walt's. They'd hung him for the gesture, and cut him down the next moment, and drawn him to hear him shriek, before they finished it off with the quartering. He's on four crossroads now, stuck high, that all may see. If you're disbelieving me, you can see the pieces, but make haste. The birds—"

"Stop! I do not disbelieve you— God help us all! What would you have me do?"

"You must take the boy."

She stooped quickly, and yanked the child to his feet again, but he made no protest, only stood with his sturdy legs wide, his small mouth set.

"I? But—"

"Hold your peace till you look well at him, then tell me if you'd have him starve in the woods. There's no choice but that. I can whore and steal and eat offal to keep breath in my body, but not our fine gentleman there."

Ajax's mind whirled. This woman had saved Gerald's life, but how could he take the child? He was leaving tomorrow dawn. "Good God," he exclaimed, "Why have you done this? Why have you brought him here?"

"Because he belongs here." Her grim mouth and suddenly steady eyes challenged him. There was nothing about her of the soft receptive wench Gerald had taken. The guns that had stopped the march on Lambeth had changed her. She stood in the main room of Stacys Holding demanding, where she once had begged; asserting, where she had felt bold to hint.

Ajax looked from her to the child. In his heart he knew, he had known from the beginning, why she had told him look well at the child. Those wide apart dark eyes, the high cheek bones, the long, finely modelled skull— The woman was not lying. The boy was so like Gerald it was ridiculous. Ajax smiled in spite of himself, but the child did not smile back. The level eyes met his with a cold pride. So had Gerald looked a hundred times, putting an adversary neatly in his place.

Matilda laughed without mirth. "Oh, he's Gerald's all right. I could not deny it when my life depended on it. Walt took one look at the child when he was scarce alive yet—and hated me from that day. That's why I had to—do what I did. He'd do naught for the boy, and no more for me than the law forced him. This young popinjay's the root of many things."

She shrugged, loosed the child's hand, and started for the door. The child did not take his eyes from his uncle's. At the threshold, however, she stopped.

"Do what you will with him. I'd have put him in the Thames, if you'd refused him, and that's God's truth, so you need have no regrets."

She paused, looked at the boy, shrugged, and left quickly.

Neither the child nor Ajax looked after her. It was as if she had come, and gone, as an instrument of destiny.

Ajax knelt and stretched out his hands. "Gerald," he whispered. "Gerald."

The child started toward him, with uncertain, fearless steps.

XXIII

AJAX RODE through the May noon to Vane. Tomorrow dawn he would have left England forever—all the familiar, gentle beauty that ran through his blood like a song. He would have left it for crags and forest, for cold and heat beyond man's knowledge. All travelers reported the new land a land of starkness and splendor alike awful. Yet he knew that Vane's heart would go with him.

The loss of Raby Castle to Wentworth had left the elder Vane an old man. He was a fighter still, but one who fought doggedly, for his honor's sake, without the zest or hope of youth. Ajax knew Harry would not leave his father in his need. But for that, Vane might well have gone with him, in flesh as in spirit.

He turned in at the gates decisively, and seeing Harry in a chair just past the open door, entered without knock or hail. Automatically, Vane half rose, hand on rapier. Seeing who had come, he grinned apologetically, and shrugged, as if to say, You see the pass I'm come to.

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Each had gathered from the other's face the essential knowledge of this hour. Vane had suspected for some time Ajax's activities. There had been rumors, running underground like fire through peat.

He pushed the decanter forward, but Ajax noted he took nothing himself. His eyes did not leave Ajax, and the first word either spoke was Vane's quiet, "So. It has come."

"You aren't surprised?"

"Only that it has delayed so long." His full lips thinned, and he began to stride about restlessly. "You are not the serf-breed, either, Stacy."

"You heard about Gerald? The truth, I mean. Not that sugar-comfit about his great properties in Virginia."

"Then it *was* banishment? I thought so. But better cloaked than the seizure of Raby. That was confiscation, pure and simple." He paused, then asked sharply, "What of Stacys Holding?"

"Nothing—yet. When they discover I am gone— Though they may not miss me for some time, having their minds full of other matters. As far as I know, they have no suspicion of me. And it may be, we shall escape further attention."

"It may be. At any rate, I shall do what I can to protect you. I doubt Buckinghamshire will be troubled—yet. And if they wait long enough—"

"Exactly." Ajax raised his glass. "And in the meantime, I trust forever, Dolly Wimple will remain in charge. She has been, anyway, since my mother died. She will do at least as well, without our whores to addle her." His mouth twisted, between bitterness and fatigue. "God, what I would give for my youth back."

Vane laughed shortly. "You are hardly doddering. There is yet time," he remarked dryly.

"Yet sometimes I feel—"

"You feel growing pains, my friend. Surely, you realize there is greater power in you now than there was a year back! You have the guts to mold a wilderness. I take it you will go to Gerald?"

"No." He had not been positive, until he heard the word. Now, Vane's surprise challenged him to explanation, clarifying his decision. "Gerald must have a free hand. And Gerald, for all his banishment, is under no ban. Whereas I— I shall be under suspicion of more than I have done, and God knows that would suffice, were it known. And added to the rest, I must sail without permission." His lip curled. "Amusing, isn't it, that I shall really be guilty of the crime for which my innocent brother was banished? But certainly, however you add it, I would be poor company for a gentle-

man trying to make our gracious King forget his misdemeanors! No—I shall sail aboard the *Griffin*, to Massachusetts Bay, come tomorrow dawn."

"The *Griffin*!" It was a cry, as if at the word Vane could no longer curb his emotion. He turned and walked slowly to the window. Beyond, the gentle beauty of an English spring spread, false with promise. Spring would come to England, and summer: but English youth would not reap what English age had sown. It must burn over the fields with bitterness of spirit, and water them with tears, and dung them with its own flesh, if England were to be England, to greet another spring. He said, "Stacy, I think that I should tell you that I have at last decided to wed the daughter of Sir Christopher Wray. It is my father's wish—and mine. By God's good grace, I shall complete my work. If not, I shall have sons, to do it in their time. The end is not yet."

His tone caught Ajax's attention. "Do you think that I should stay?"

"God, no. You will create a new land for your sons. I shall beget sons to redeem the old. Both are shadows of the divine Plan, of the Eternal Function. We know, or we believe we know, the function of our England: but who can define the function of a wilderness, vouchsafed through prayer to man in the hour of his extremity? I believe there is at the heart of this miracle a great Purpose. I believe there is a mark on the New World: His mark. And when you have lived among these people, gentle and harsh, strait and indulgent, you will discover as I discovered that though they may fly at each other's throats in the assurance of their own opinions, yet in their hearts at the root of every action and judgment lies the belief in their own destiny: that they have been given life at this hour and in that place to fulfill the Will of God." He smiled suddenly, ruefully. "You will find it a difficult and stiff-necked credo, doubtless. As I did. Folk who believe themselves God's accredited agents are by no means easy companions. But if you cannot bring yourself to their way

of life, there is always the Isle of Errors. I hear it welcomed my friends, after their condemnation. I shall be rejoiced to send letters of recommendation to those who would still welcome my friends." There was a moment's pause. Then, as if at a sudden decision, he faced Ajax squarely. "If you go to Aquidneck, I beg that you will bear a message—to her. Tell her that I know at last her meaning: that the true service of God may lie in offering the cup of cold water as in the mysteries of fasting and prayer. Tell her—tell her that I serve my God the better for serving her."

"I shall tell her," Ajax said, and rose. Vane's words had made further speech futile. It was as if the whole meaning of the colony lay in that one sentence.

XXIV

CLARISSA HAD come at last to Stacys Holding.

There was in her coming none of the fabric of dreams, none of the proud fulfillment of her plans, nor the worshipping wonder that had colored Ajax's and Gerald's. She had come as a clear-headed and desperate woman, sensing the shifting of the sands beneath her feet, determined only to establish a firm foundation on which to stand.

Charles and his army had been driven from the North by the despised Covenanters, and returned bewildered and humiliated to their homes. A new army was in the forming, but these were grim men, and little given to romancing. Uprisings were no longer a filip to a lovely lady's chocolate, a cause for brow smoothing, and gentle, well-rewarded sympathy. They had become open and frequent, culminating only yesterday in the apprentices' rebellion, after which the most delicate eyes might be affronted by the display of human carrion, twisted and dark with clotted blood, skewered at street corner or balcony, to warn future malefactors of their end. Nor were the signs of England's division confined within herself. The Dutch and Spanish, judging her too busy to protest, had ventured so close to her shores for one of their battles that the Downs had vibrated with their cannonading.

Most of the great gentlemen had left London, in the service of the state or of their own prudence; and those who remained were preoccupied with matters of greater import than the pretty foible of a lady's virginity. Even expert courtesans were now beset with creditors, and the whisper that this lady was politically inclined, or that one no longer in favor, sufficed to complete her ruin.

When Charlotte had secretly offered for sale to her more

fortunate rivals this trinket, or that bauble, Clarissa had paused. When the Ponsonby crystals and laces, peacocks and pearls and brocades, flung on the open market, brought less than sufficed to feed her for a month, Clarissa trembled. But when one dawn rumored the beauty disappeared, and another discovered her lovely body, bloated and discolored, beating at Black Fryers Stairs with every lapping of the Thames, Clarissa ordered her horse, and started for Stacys Holding.

Dolly Wimple opened the great door to her. The old woman's eyes were red and swollen with weeping for Ajax's suffering, and Gerald's departure, and the sorrow her late lady would have felt for this undoing of her sons. But they were not too dimmed to note, as Ajax had known she must some day, that Clarissa was different. She was not a common slut like Matilda, nor yet a high-born one like Lady Charlotte.

She stood in the late afternoon sun, her small lovely head nimbused with it, her Madonna blue cloak drawn close, her Madonna blue eyes childlike and appealing. Never had she been more truly "the Blessed Lady," and Dolly, looking at her steadily through a minute's silence, suddenly knew who she was: the lady Gerald had referred to, so long ago, as "the last virgin in London." And if that were true, there was more, too, to the matter. She was, as Dolly had guessed, the lady beloved of both the Stacy men.

No other human creature could have passed Dolly then, with Matilda's child asleep upstairs, and Ajax gone forth with that wildness to his face and riding. But Dolly stood aside, curtsying, as Clarissa entered.

She did not even suspect the quick weighing glance the blue eyes sent from corner to corner. She felt only the warmth and kindness in the hand Clarissa laid for a second on hers, and did not dream the intention beneath the gesture. And when Clarissa spoke, she believed in the sympathy that underlay her words.

"I heard about your Master Gerald," she said, "and I am so very sorry. I know how much you loved him, and how fond he was of you." Dolly almost cried, And have you heard the latest disgrace and misfortune, befallen to Master Ajax, also? But Clarissa was still speaking. "But you still have your Master Ajax, and he must be a great comfort, he's so wonderful and strong and reliable."

At this, Dolly flung her apron over her head, and burst into open weeping. "He is all of that," she sobbed from the depths, "but—"

"But—? But—? Speak, can't you? But *what?*"

The cry was so shrill Dolly dropped her apron. She was determined to hide the disgrace Ajax had suffered, but Clarissa's drawn face and distraught eyes, betraying what Dolly could only interpret as her love for Ajax, touched her deeply.

"There, there," she urged, patting Clarissa's shoulder capably, "there there, my poor dearie—don't take on so."

"Take on!" cried Clarissa, with considerable reason, "I haven't taken on! It's you! Where is he? What's happened to him? Oh, blessed holy Mary, don't tell me that *he's—*"

"Nay, nay, now, have no fear, I'll tell you nothing. He'll tell you himself, no doubt, if you'll be patient."

"Patient! How can I be patient with—" she curbed herself by a great effort, and turned away. Something was wrong. How wrong, God alone knew. *It's the war, doubtless, she thought. I must be quick. He must not go until we are fast wed. Once that is done, I am safe. But I must secure him, before it is too late. I'll do anything he asks, anything!* "May I see him?" she asked quietly.

Dolly, who had noted the swift color surging over Clarissa's face, hailing her secret determination, decided she must have heard of Ajax's trouble after all, and hurried out from London, to succor him. Her sentimental old heart lightened with the thought. Here at last was a lady fitted to

be mistress of Stacys Holding. Here at last was a worthy successor to her late mistress.

"Come in and have a warm," she said, leading her to the main room. "These spring evenings have a chill to them still, but I'll send Tanker in with something to rouse the fire, and get you a bit of a bite to eat. Master Ajax will be returning shortly, doubtless," and she lit the tapers and steadied her voice, to defeat her own rising doubts.

Clarissa crossed to the hearth, and dropped in a chair, exhausted with relief as well as the weariness of her journey and anxiety. She heard Dolly bustling down the hall, and leaned her head back, and closed her eyes.

When, at last, she heard a door open, she thought tiredly it must be Tanker, and did not bother to move or look up.

XXV

AJAX, DRIVEN by pain and restlessness and the foreboding of tomorrow's danger, did not notice the crackle of the fire in the main room, the glow of the many tall candles in the crystal sconces. Only when he had entered, flinging hat and crop on a chair, did he realize he was not alone.

Clarissa sat in his mother's chair, her head framed by the Stacy arms, her small hand languid on his mother's crewel box.

It was the dream that had come to him so often since that first night of his love, when he had pictured her so: the dream that left him exhausted, crying out for her, staring into the night, vised between his loyalties.

Seeing her so now, the months swept back, taking with them all their hunger and relinquishing and bitterness and disillusionment, calling to his lips the words he would have spoken then. "Clarissa. My dear love."

The whisper pierced Clarissa's drowsiness, caught her to her feet with a little glad cry, and brought her toward him with a childlike eager impulsiveness. But with her opening eyes, with her first movement, Time swept over Ajax again, in a great smothering tide of remembrance.

He saw in that minute, not Clarissa, poised almost tiptoe, hands outstretched, but Gerald, returning from Charlotte's, his young face awed with his new love; himself, opening his mother's crewel box, to find heartbreak in it; and at last, Gerald crying aloud his denunciation, flinging the little blue rosette into the fire.

He remembered that he hated Clarissa, and smiled to see the joy in her face changed to bewilderment and then fear as she stared at him.

It was several seconds before either of them spoke, and

when at last Clarissa broke the silence, Ajax rejoiced to realize she had no clue to his disaffection. It would be sweet to let her grope and fret, and then to tell her that he knew everything, that Gerald had told him of her perfidy. He stood listening and smiling, with a small cold smile, like a hidden dagger, while her words faltered and fell between them.

"Ajax— You don't understand— I had to come. Surely, that isn't immodest. I have waited—so long— But I could not stay away forever, knowing that you suffered—"

"And why do you imagine that your coming here will relieve my suffering?"

"Why— I thought— I thought no matter what happened, if you loved me—"

"Loved you? Loved you—no matter what happened? But could even you, devoid of any decency of feeling, imagine that so slight an accident as my loving you would blind me to your betrayal of my brother?"

He saw her sway, but reached no hand to help her, though the blood had swept from her face, and for a moment he believed that she must faint.

"If you mean by 'betrayal'—" she began, but could not continue. Her hand fluttered vaguely, as if she had hardly strength to dismiss the accusation. "As for—for what you think me—no matter what I was, if you loved me, you would forgive it."

"Forgive!" The word burst from him like pus from an abscess too long ripe. It held all his heartbreak and contempt for her, all his anguish over Gerald's banishment, and his own imminent flight. He began walking up and down, gnawing at his lip, torn by his pain of body and spirit, battered by the passion seeing her had aroused anew, and the hatred he had nurtured since Gerald's going. Out of the turmoil flared one clear thought: he despised above all else the chastity he had worshiped, the lovely thing she had used, like a will-o'-the-wisp, to lure himself and Gerald to their

destruction. Flashingly, he saw again the face of Matilda, the thin body of the child asleep upstairs, and the memory was bitterness on his tongue, and steel in his heart. It maddened him that Matilda, in her courage and pride and faithfulness, should be hounded even from the sparse crusts of the waterfront brothel, while this clear-eyed traitorous puppet continued to plot her treacheries unscathed.

She watched him, her assurance growing with his evident agony. At last, something of her triumph found its way into words.

"I did not dream before how much you loved me."

He flung to face her, his eyes flaming. "Loved you! Loved you? I hate you. I hate you as no man has hated a woman since Eve lost Adam Paradise!"

She nodded, and laughed softly, a mocking, fluttery laugh. "Oh, no, my dear. You love me, as no man has loved a woman since Adam knew Paradise well lost!" His hands went out toward her white throat, swelled with her soft laughter, but she did not move. "If you kill me, I shall only know it more surely. You love me, do you hear? You love me so that it is killing you, driving you to madness. You love me—and I am glad. You asked why I came, and that is why, and your heart knows it: I came, because all these months, from the hour you first saw me, I knew that you loved me!"

She laughed again, and he turned away with the cry of a man wrenching himself from an evil spell. The torment of his body, the dream and knowledge of what her flesh would feel like against his, was pierced with darting flares of memory: Suckling's voice, "The cleverest minx in London," Gerald's, ". . . each as faithless as her sisters." What new plotting had brought her here? Had Laud guessed his part in the Lambeth march, and sent her here to trick him into a confession? She would find that one of the Stacys was her master.

He folded his arms across his chest, and walked to her

deliberately, and looked into her eyes a long minute before he said, "Why did you come here tonight?"

"I have told you! Because you lo—"

"But tonight? Tonight, rather than tomorrow, or a month ago."

"I believed, a month ago, that you would come to me. I've always known you loved me—I told you that. I thought when Gerald went, you might guess why—"

"I had no need to guess," he told her harshly. "He told me—everything."

"He told you—?" Fear widened her eyes. Was this the end of her hopes? Had Gerald, in his great bitterness, poisoned Ajax against her? She had always known the Stacys were fools about each other.

Ajax, reading her uncertainty, smiled. "Yes. You thought he would be too proud, or too greatly rushed, to tell me, didn't you? But no matter. That is over and past. Tonight is still with us. Why are you here—tonight?"

She wanted to scream, to rage, to rush from the room, goaded by his insistence. She had told him, and told him, and nothing she said could shift those cold steady eyes, change those cold, unwavering words.

"Well?"

She cried, "I came tonight because I could not bear it any longer! Why do you want to torture me? You know what London has been— It is horrible, and I am afraid!" She began to sob hysterically. Still he only stood watching. "And last night—last night—I heard it all— Have you forgotten how near I am to Southwark? I heard the terrible beat of their marching, and their jeers, and their singing—their horrible, endless, blasphemous singing. And then I saw the torch-light." She stopped, shuddering, and covered her face with her hands.

Ajax drew a long breath. She had seen him. It was as he suspected.

"You saw the torchlight," he reminded her evenly. "And what else did you see?"

"Nothing! I called Dorcas, and she drew the curtains, so that it could not come in. It was like blood, welling over my wall—like blood! But even the drawn curtains could not shut out the sound. He turned the cannon on them—did you know that? I heard it roar, and then the terrible silence, and then—then the screams. And then they began to shout again, and sing. God, I have never heard anything like that singing! I pulled the counterpane over my head, and lay there sweating, and cold. And then—then you ask me why I came here tonight! Have you ever thought what it is to be a woman—alone—at night?"

Ajax's drawn breath was like tearing linen. *A woman—alone—at night.*

Clarissa had said that. Clarissa, whose virginity had destroyed them.

"So," he said, "so you came here. You came here, because you feared to be alone—at night—and you believed I loved you." He laughed suddenly, harshly. "It is a strange turn of the wheel that makes the 'Blessed Lady,' the last damn virgin in London, admit she fears the night—alone."

"Ajax!" she had fallen back, fingers on lips, before the thing she read in his eyes, but he swept on relentlessly.

"But how can you be so sure that you will prefer it with me?"

"Ajax— You can't mean—you don't mean—" She looked around wildly, but he had caught her wrist, and flung her to him.

"I mean exactly what you mean."

"But I don't! I only meant—I wanted to—to feel you near me."

"As you shall, my dear. Very near—very, very near."

His mouth covered hers, silencing her cry, forcing her to his will until her will merged with his, and she fell back in

his arms, all her lovely body quivering with the long pent hunger, freed at last.

He lifted her swiftly, then, and carried her up all the long staircase, silencing his pounding heart with the repeated meaningless, *I hate her, I hate her*. Like a man entranced, he remembered that hour of his new love, when he had visioned ascending these stairs with Clarissa, warning himself that he must be gentle, that she was different from all other women. He need not be gentle now, for Clarissa—Clarissa was like all the others, as faithless, as mad for his love. *I hate her*, he told himself, *I am doing this because I hate her, to complete Gerald's avenging*, and the blood surged through him, and he stumbled like a blind man.

When he had loosed her bodice, and the heavy skirt and petticoats had tumbled around her slim sleek calves, and she stood only in her shift, he moved away a little, and spoke with a calm terrible as the heart of the hurricane.

"Take off your shift."

Her lidded eyes opened, and then fluttered closed again, before his, the color sweeping from her small round breasts to the pale curls on her forehead.

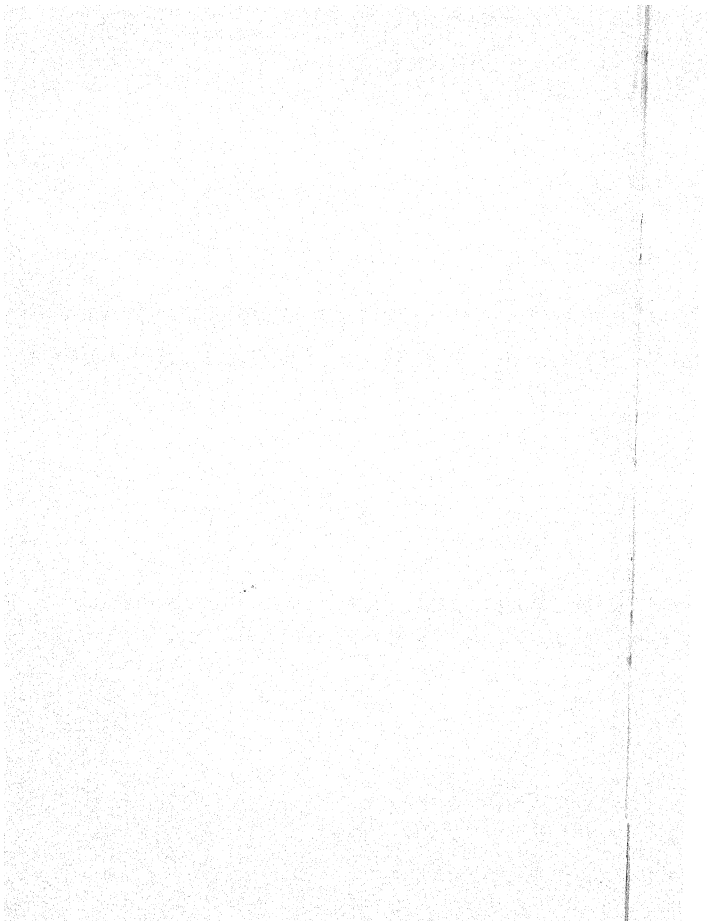
"Take off your shift," he repeated, "and come to me. You shall never say I forced you. But make haste, for the night is short."

She opened her eyes again, and looked at him, and knew he would not move from where he stood, and that she had not in all her newly quickened body the strength to refuse, the will to escape.

With a little moan, half fury and half passion, she tore the linen loose, and ran to him, and hid her face against his breast.

II

THE WILDERNESS



I

GERALD LAY on the centuries-deep bed of pine needles, and looked at the river below, and sweated, and groaned, and slapped mosquitoes. Staring up the mighty trunk of the pine, he could see the crest, so far above it seemed to pierce the sky. The needles were longer than his hand. The mosquitoes, shimmering up from the swamp, veiled the brown water with their numbers.

That was the new land: plenty that was terror, vastness that destroyed.

He hated it, as he hated anything that might conquer him, and fretted at his impotence. He had lain like this for a month, with his strength flowing from him in sweat and flux, hungering to die, and striving to live, that he might conquer the land.

He yelled for the old Negress, lent in his need by a neighbor, marveling that the voice that had shaken Stacys Holding was here no more than the piping of a child. Whether it was the space or his own weakness he could not know. The old woman told him daily he was stronger, but he was not sure.

She came out now, her great hips shaking, flung a handful of evil-smelling roots on the smudge and, while he gagged at the stench, re-entered the cabin. He had told her a dozen times the Indian smudge roots were more fatal to man than insect, but she shrugged and persisted, sharing the redmen's belief the evil smell would rout the spirits responsible for the pest.

He wanted now to pursue her, howling his displeasure as he would have at home, but he felt he had not the energy to move. Later, when the fireball sun hissed into the water, the nearing wolves would force him to do so. When that happened, he would drag himself erect, and stumble to the

cabin, and fling himself on the tick stuffed with cattails, and pull the duffield over him, and curse Laud and Charlotte and Clarissa, and sleep.

It had not always been like this. For almost two months he had toiled with two indented Englishmen subhired in Jamestown on his arrival, clearing an acre of his land, flinging up a cabin and a cookhouse. They had warned him against such labor before his time of seasoning, told him that the land waited like a mountain lion, secret and powerful, taut for the spring. But hale and brown from the sea trip, he had laughed at them. He had been warned against the voyage, hadn't he? He had been told that more than half a ship's company, seamen and passengers, were apt to die before they saw land. And he had seen them die. Not in such numbers, but enough. Yet he had walked ashore as a free Englishman should, erect and laughing, looking danger in the eye.

He had stayed in the town less than a fortnight, acting swiftly and eagerly, subhiring his laborers, engaging his two surveyors, entering a requisition for blacks on the next ship from the Indies.

Then he had struck inland, he and the four Englishmen, paddled and guided by four Nansemond warriors, returning home. In a two days' journey they had passed half-a-dozen clearings. After the seventh, the surveyors started measuring. They carried a chain between them, and laid it down with great care and precision. At noon on the third day, Gerald stood on his own land. The Englishmen stood around him, their tools of labor in their hands. The Indians, one foot on the bank, one in the barge, waited. Seized by an impulse, Gerald tore the broken feather from his hat, and plunged the quill into the ground at his feet. His hand shook, and his skin prickled, but the line of jaw and mouth was stern, and no man questioned him. It was the first marker of his ground. From it, the surveyors measured, moving accurately back from the river, over roots and swamp, over level ground

and hill. The mighty trees shut out the sun, so that the white men strode through a symbolic and mysterious twilight, but no underbrush impeded their movements, for the ground had been frequently burned over by their red brothers, in their hunt. At sunset on the fourth day they stood again at the river, the last stream attested, the last tree blazed.

It had been early April, then. The sweetness of the air, the fecundity of the earth, lulled his misgivings. He looked on the black soil and found it good. With the Indians he called the season Cattapeuk, Season of Blossoms. He bent his back and broke ground, he hewed the tree, and planted seed.

Then the land struck.

Through the many things he had forgotten, he remembered now the haze crawling from the river, the heat of a May noon, the indolence creeping over him. Cohattayough, Season of the High Sun, had discovered him.

The English carpenter had stayed with him until the old Negress arrived, sent from the next plantation, in response to the returning forester's appeal. Then he, too, had hurried back. Gerald had begged him to remain, but the law was explicit, the penalty severe. No trained mechanic, free or indented, could remain away from town, once his job was completed. Their services were too valuable, the temptation to become planters themselves too great. Gerald cursed a community where labor was of greater value than a landed gentry, and let him go. From that hour, he had seen no white face.

Yet his ground already bore a name. The carpenter, the Negress, used it. He had named it in his delirium, and bitterness and pride and irony forbade his changing. Two thousand acres, back from and along the river it stretched, as solid a property as the colony boasted. And he had called it Feathergrant.

Oddly, through the long days of recuperation, the name gave him courage, as if its lightness minimized the weight

upon him, the heaviness of the ordeal ahead. The cleared ground must be planted, the felled trees prepared for lumber. His slaves had not come. These things he had realized before. Today, they pricked him warningly, a dagger at his back. So at last he knew that though his strength had flowed away the hard and bitter kernel of life remained.

He forced himself to his feet, saw through the mist of dizziness the weeds sprung up to choke the young plants in the clearing, and retched with weakness and discouragement.

A shout rose from the river. The Negress lumbered out of the cabin, crying out her joy and disbelief. Steadying himself against the pine trunk, Gerald saw her hurrying down the bank, saw a man step from a narrow log boat and, after a word to her, start upward, his face lifted.

Incredulously, Gerald saw that it was white.

He tried to go forward, but the other made a quick gesture.

"My name's Rawlins," he said. "Christopher Rawlins. I'm your neighbor, and a pretty bad one. Sit down, Master Stacy. You've had a mean time, haven't you? I hope Hepsibah's helped you."

"I'm still alive," Gerald tried to grin, "that's all I can ask, I understand."

"The other raised his eyes quickly from the ground at his feet, and dropped them again. Their intelligence, their quiet humor, lighted his long rather somber face, gave new meaning to his words. "Nonsense. You don't 'ask' anything of this land: you seize and demand. And hold. I would have come sooner, but I have been planting. I have three hundred acres, mostly under the head right of my servants." His eyes flashed up again. "I have two indented men from England, and two blacks besides Hepsibah. The other fifty acres, Master Stacy, were given me by the Government when I turned twenty-one, together with a cow, tools, weapons and ammunition, and seed, for my six years' apprenticeship. You

won't be taking up extra land for your blacks, I suppose. You have a vast property already."

"I have two thousand acres, and it's not worth one back home."

Rawlins smiled. "That depends, I daresay, on whether you ever had one back home. I didn't, of course. I was one of the half dozen lads sent out from Lincolnshire, on the second Poor Ship. You probably did not even know that such things existed."

Gerald nodded slowly. "But I did," he said. "It was in 1620."

A great nostalgia swept him. He stood again in the main room of Stacys Holding, watching Ajax, tongue screwed in cheek, small hand guided by Mistress Stacy, signing as head of the family to petition the Justice of the Peace to name Tanker's stout young brother for the emigration. The young Stacys had thought it a great lark, and had speculated for months on his possible adventures. Gerald realized now he had not thought of Martin Tanker in years.

"Right!" Rawlins's surprised exclamation recalled him. "Some went from every shire. God, I'll never forget it. We fought for the chance like starving bitches for a bone. The law said we could not be sent without our consent. Consent! There were two boys maimed in our parish on the eve of sailing. The rule was only the sound could go. Thank God, I wasn't responsible. But I might have been. Who mightn't at fifteen, with enough food, and clothes, and education, for the prize? And at the end—land. Land of our own, free and clear, that we could even leave to our children. Fifty acres—or more, if we could increase it by labor. Land possibly next to a gentleman's, where we would stand as straight as he." His tawny eyes flicked Gerald's, and his mouth kinked appreciatively. "Master Stacy, if you had slept for twelve years, as I did, curled like a mongrel, in a discarded kennel, with a blanket too rotten for a horse dragged around you for warmth, you'd give all England for one acre of Virginia."

Gerald looked away quickly, afraid the other might guess the lump in his throat, the smarting eyes, and not realize that they sprang only from his illness. He knew suddenly that he liked Christopher Rawlins, and held out an impulsive hand. Rawlins took it for a moment in a quick, nervous clasp.

"You'll stay for supper?"

"Lord love you, I'm staying the night. You're going down river with me, tomorrow, to fetch your blacks. They were landed two days back, and sent on to Shirley Hundred, but with half the town clamoring for labor, God knows what's left you."

"But I stipulated—"

"You stipulated five blacks. But they come like any other animal: old and young, male and female. And if you're wise—" Rawlins's eyes met his amusedly—"you won't object if one is female. And young." Gerald flushed and straightened, and Rawlins smiled. "You can look at them as stock, if you want to," he drawled. "Most of us start that way."

II

IT WAS at Shirley Hundred that Gerald discovered how cool Feathergrant was. The town was one of the five tobacco centers, and the long warehouses, where the fall crop would be stored for the viewers' grading, stretched along the river-front, blocking such small breeze as the day granted. The heat struck down from a brazen sky, flowed up from the narrow street in shimmering waves. Stumbling, he followed Rawlins to the ordinary, slumped in a chair, sank his head on his hands.

He was vaguely aware that Rawlins had stopped at the scales, while they weighed out six pounds of tobacco, the price of the meal, and added it to the pile by the door, and reached in his pocket for the 18d. for his own food. The woman who took it looked at him curiously.

"You're new come over," she said, and he nodded. "I knew by the coin and the look of you. You'll be shut of them both soon enough, never fear."

He did not answer, and after a moment, she flounced off, her dowlas skirt swinging. He did not even notice it. He was wondering why neither the tangy scent of the tobacco nor the succulent odor of the long lean ham, turning on its spit, could banish the smell of hot dust and human sweat.

Rawlins joined him, and shoved over a pewter mug of aqua vitae. He raised it in shaking hands, and as it burnt his gullet remembered gratefully that he was no longer ill. From the moment of Rawlins's coming, he had felt better. The dawn trip down river in Rawlins's boat, breakfast at Rawlins's house, the drive here in Rawlins's high-sided tobacco cart—all these things had stimulated him, given him new hope and purpose.

Rawlins said now, "I've claimed from the beginning

water's the chief cause of flux. We never drank it home—and here, we get little else. Water and maize. Maize and water. God! No wonder we die like flies."

He refilled the mug, and Gerald drained it. Oddly, the heat within made him forget the heat without. He began to laugh, soundlessly at first, then loudly. Rawlins raised his eyes, looked at him quickly, and dropped them. They ate enormously, and in complete silence: ham, venison, quail, sturgeon, wild duck. When they had finished, Rawlins took Gerald's arm, and led him to the slave pound.

A dozen blacks had been sent on, under three consignments. One was an old woman, one a girl. The others were prime bucks. The other two consignees had stipulated men, and the shipowner's representative was bound to force the two women on Gerald. It was Rawlins who discovered that only ten were definitely consigned. The other two could be sold to an independent bidder. The news swept the town like wildfire. It was seldom that a laborer could be bought in open market. English labor was indented before it left home, the cargo of the slavers spoken for months before arrival. Every planter near town hurried in while the argument was still high. They gathered around, marking with narrowed, expert eyes the line of bone and muscle, weighing and measuring mentally, hope running high.

There was a sudden, small commotion in the pound. The black girl, a moment before squatting with the rest, had risen. She came forward slowly, the chains at her ankles chinking rhythmically. From puberty, the wise women of her tribe had schooled her in the arts which must enhance her value to men. Instinctively, now, she used them, stretching up her firm breasts, undulating her slim, hard-muscled torso, in a dance old at the dawn of man.

The words of the planters faded in dry throats. The slave broker stopped his argument, quick eyes going from face to face. This was a matter new in his experience. It changed a situation of which he had despaired.

The girl's body moved faster, faster, on her firmly planted, unmoving feet. One of the black men had half risen. The broker's lash snapped, and he sank back, panting, covering his eyes, groaning and swaying in uncontrolled passion. The girl noted neither of them. Her attention was focused on the white faces. One, she knew, must take her from the pound, must loose the chains. She did not doubt the purpose of his ownership. Her sex, her age, dictated that. Labor was for the old, like the hag they had taken with her. For herself, there must be no doubt of her worth. Men value most what they pay for in sacrifice and bitterness of spirit. It was so in the jungle, and looking at the white, strained faces, she knew it was so here.

The girl stopped dancing. The broker's hand fell. Bidding started at fifty pounds of tobacco, the price of a kid, moved up, up to four hundred pounds, to five hundred. Gerald began to bid. He put English coin against tobacco, and when Rawlins would have stopped him, reminded him of his own advice, to get a young female, for "stock." In the end he paid 300 s., the price of a prime ox. The broker, with a grin, threw in the old woman. He did not want her, and Rawlins advised against it, but the look in her eyes when the crowd jeered decided him.

They tied the women to the five bucks, and flung them all in the back of the tobacco cart. They lay on the floor, peering through the slatted sides, their chains clanking as the solid wheels bumped on root and stone. On the high seat in front, Rawlins and Gerald rode, too deep in their thoughts to talk, until the sound of a scuffle and the girl's scream woke them to the way of all flesh.

They untied her, and took her in front, then. She slumped on the narrow board at Gerald's feet, clinging to a post, rubbing her breast against his knees. Rawlins grinned, and laid the whip on the horses. The dust rose gilded with the late sun, the ungainly wagon jostled and banged the louder. They turned into the forest, and the flying squirrels sailed

overhead chattering, and the red foxes fled before them, and the bluebirds and cardinals screamed protests.

Gerald called the girl Nera. His tone spanned the bounds of language. She raised her eyes and smiled.

He said quickly, "I want to buy Hepsibah, if you'll sell her. The old woman and Nera can help her."

"You can keep her to train your hag," Rawlins drawled, "but I'll need her, come harvesting."

He had not mentioned Nera. Gerald's face flamed. He said sharply, "I'll drive, if you'll let me," and stared straight ahead, avoiding Rawlins's quick up-glance as they changed places, ignoring Nera's indrawn breath, sharp as a hiss, when he left her.

At Rawlingsgap, they tied her apart from the others. She wailed through the darkness like a young animal, and refused the mess of partridge and mallard and omini, simmering fragrantly in the great iron cauldron swung between saplings. In the firelight, they could see her slim outline, the flash of her teeth and eyes. They were both bitterly aware of her, unable to free throbbing minds or desirous bodies of the memory of her dancing. When at last they slept it was fitfully, dreaming and muttering with heat and lust, to wake before dawn, their strength spent.

Rawlins returned with Gerald to Feathergrant. He was grateful for the other's guidance in the handling of his blacks, determined to prove to the other Englishman his intention in buying Nera.

When they arrived, Hepsibah was stirring together a potage of beans, peas, deer suet, and oysters, Indian fashion, chanting a combination of African voodoo and an English hymn. She looked up, saw them, and advanced, bristling like a turkey cock. Only Rawlins's quick command averted trouble. She had been the sole woman in his household so long she despised rivalry, and showed her aversion by bared teeth and a quick, primitive gesture of insult. Nera had knelt in the barge, nostrils distended, eyes half mooned.

She refused to move when Rawlins motioned her ashore and, when he clasped her arm, twisted free and sank her white teeth in his flesh.

Gerald pivoted at his startled cry, and saw the lash descend on the sleek brown shoulders. While she still wailed with fury and pain, Rawlins yanked her from the boat, and flung her at Hepsibah's feet. Then he stooped to the river and washed the blood from his hand. His heart was pounding, his breath too fast.

He had brought one of his own blacks to train Gerald's in planting. When he rose from the river bank, he saw the six men watching him covertly. Automatically, he put his hand to his belt, where a long-muzzled pistol snuggled.

Gerald had gone on to the cabin. Nera's eyes, turned to him after the lash fell, made him think of a dog's. He loved dogs, but he knew that amorous cleverness, that feline sleek swiftness, had no part in the honest love of dogs. He pulled at the ill-fitting door. When it stuck, he gave it a vicious yank that loosed the handle, so that it fell at his feet. He kicked it, cursing relievedly at the excuse, but could not ease his mind of the matter. He crossed to the rough circle cut in the wall, that served for window, and stared across at Hepsibah, standing arms akimbo, planning her attack.

Hepsibah was no fool. She had seen the girl's peaked breasts, the men's agitation. She knew she might get help from the old woman, squatting and mumbling to herself, but had small hope of the stronger, younger arms. She grunted and indicated tasks, true—but when they were ignored, she did not slap or maltreat the girl as she would the old woman. The white masters might deceive themselves, strutting and pretending indifference like a cockatoo, but with Nera's coming jungle law had been established at Feathergrant, and she knew it.

Gerald knew it, too, when their food was brought. He and Rawlins sat side by side on broad cowhide chairs, staring at the river, when Hepsibah approached with the trencher,

Nera padding at her heels. Hepsibah served Rawlins, and the girl stood watching, intent, without objection; but when she would have served Gerald, she sprang forward, snatched the trencher from her accustomed hands, and setting it on the ground offered him a carefully chosen morsel, in her tapered brown fingers. Only Gerald's objection could have stopped her feeding him, bit by bit. That his refusal was immediate and stern did not hoodwink Hepsibah, nor quell Rawlins's sly grin. Nor did it prevent her curling against his legs as he ate, and for the second night refusing her own food when it was dished from the mess shared by the others.

That night, Rawlins broke their silence. Gerald felt his question, and precipitated it.

"God's final Name! What is it? Speak out, can't you?"

Gerald's irritation, springing from a cause he knew too well, twisted the half smile on Rawlins's lips. "I must know how far to go with your blacks, Stacy."

"As far as you like," Gerald grunted.

"I mean—with *all* of them. The girl, for example. You saw her bite me. I had to lash her or you'd have had a bad time with all of them. You've got to remember what they are, where they come from. But in future, I must be sure. Is she for Hepsibah's use, or yours?"

Gerald slouched to the window. The hot breeze, heavy with honeysuckle and the chirp of peepers, mocked him. The clearing was too small to defeat a wilderness. Somewhere, there was civilization, decency—Or was it decent, this thing men had fought and denied themselves and died for? He remembered Matilda's brothel, the man murdered by the Searchers. Was it decent to tear a man from all his fathers had achieved, to invent a charge to cover jealousy and spleen?

He returned to Rawlins. He did not speak. He did not have to. The other turned away, his mouth one-sided with mockery—or envy.

Gerald thought, *He wants her himself. He needn't grin at me.* Yet he could not feel the rivalry he would have felt over a white woman. He knew he cared even less whether Rawlins shared Nera than he had when Suckling bedded with Charlotte. Indeed, he wished Rawlins would take her. That would remove the only barrier. The other white man could not disapprove what he himself did. For the rest—He had had so many women. It would be good—good—again. He felt his passion rising, and shut his eyes, swaying, catching at the lintel for support. So many women—

All of them—except Clarissa. Clarissa, whom he loved.

He tried to put the thought of Clarissa from his mind, but he could not. Burning, he realized he had dreamed of Clarissa, last night, at Rawlinsgap. Out of the passion roused by Nera, he had dreamed he possessed Clarissa.

His teeth clamped on his lower lip. If Clarissa had not failed him, he would not be as he was this night. He heard Rawlins, whistling, down by the river, heard the blacks, chained to a tree for the night, crooning with a deep, provocative rhythm. He did not hear the soft tread at his sill, but, when he opened his eyes, he saw her in the doorway, silhouetted against the night. He could not see the color of her skin, the heavy features, in that light. He realized sharply the form was the most perfect he had ever beheld.

He thought, *Clarissa is white*, torturing himself deliberately. *Clarissa is whiter than all other women.* He reached out his arms, glorying in Nera's blackness, as she glided toward him with the slow dignity of a ritual.

He thought, *Clarissa is cold, colder than all other women*, and kissed Nera, yielding himself utterly to her triumphant lust.

He thought, *Clarissa is aloof*, and struggled and fought in the succubal clasp of Nera.

The next day, he did not rise from his bed. He muttered some excuse to Rawlins, complaining of the exhaustion of

the trip to Shirley Hundred. He knew Rawlins was not deceived. Rawlins read the lust and satiety in his face, and made no comment. He had lived here too long, had seen too many white men defeated by the jungle. His only astonishment was that Gerald was not made of stronger stuff. He grinned to himself, waiting his own turn.

III

CLARISSA LEANED against the wind and watched the horizon, as she had for five weeks. She was used to it now. There was something symbolic in it: this seeking support of an invisible and capricious force, while waiting a future that never came.

It had been six weeks since she had lain with Ajax; six weeks of suffering and mounting dread, until the small fear that had flung her aboard the fastest ship in the Virginia trade possessed her utterly, sponging from her consciousness even the terror of shipwreck, of Moors and pirates, that engrossed the other passengers.

She knew now what Ajax had suffered, the terrible power of love in hate, of hate in love. She hated him as she had never believed she could hate man or devil, and loved him so that she knew no peace, by night or day.

She had hated him when, awakening, she found him gone, not yet suspecting where. In that moment, all the sugared tales of her friends had risen to mock her, tales of lovers who had spent the whole long day fondling their mistresses, forgetting even Royal audiences in that delight. But Ajax—Ajax had stolen from her side, without so much as a last kiss.

She had hated him when, descending, she had confronted Dolly Wimple, to hear that Ajax had ridden forth like a madman, in the deep night.

But when she had returned to Stacys Holding, a small unreasonable fear conquering her pride—when Dolly had met her, red-eyed and bitter, and told her of the message just come—then, at last, she plumbed the depths of hate. Then, at last, she realized that even while he held her in his arms, Ajax intended leaving England. Then, at last, she knew the meaning of his warning, "The night is short." It had been no lovely impatience, no passion too long de-

nied. It had been a cold statement, a fact he accepted calmly, as he took her: there were in his life only a few brief minutes for her, Clarissa Brinton, "the Blessed Lady." He had taken her as he would have taken a common whore, leaving her as casually. The madness that had possessed him as he held her, that had brought the proud, triumphant curve to her lips—it was no more than a physical desire that any woman could have wakened in him. The power she had felt surging through her, the sense of utterly commanding him, body and soul—these were tricks of her imagination. And the rest—her own frenzied yielding—She sank her face in her hands, and wished that she might die.

As her horse turned from the long avenue into the highway, she looked back at Stacys Holding. It lay beautiful and unmoved in the late afternoon light, its trees curved protectively over it, the sun shining on its empty windows. She wanted to curse it—to curse all it had sired or would sire, while earth remained.

In that moment, the unreasoning fear that had brought her here, became prescience. *All that it would sire.* She pressed her hand to her body, and stared at Stacys Holding with wide, incredulous eyes, until it faded from her view.

Within the week, she had taken passage for Virginia. She told herself it was her hate of Ajax, her determination that he should not trick her, Clarissa Brinton, as he had the light women of London. In her heart, she knew it was because her love for him drove her beyond the restraint of custom, or safety, or pride. That—and the presentiment that was always with her.

She told herself her fear was ridiculous, that all women always believed themselves pregnant, once they had lain with a man, that her long virginity and inexperience had sensitized her imagination. But as she saw the towers of Westminster and the scaffolding around the new St. Paul's disappear, she could have shouted her relief. Whatever happened, now, she would not hear the mockery of her lightly

loving friends, when she, the Blessed Lady, was brought to bed of a bastard.

Dolly Wimple had claimed not to know where Ajax had gone. All Clarissa's wiles, all her bribes from her pitiful, small hoard, and even the storm of fury loosed at last by breaking nerves, had been powerless to glean from the old woman more than the bare fact that a lad who once had worked for a gentleman in the vicinity had brought the message Ajax had left England.

"He said I was not to fret myself," Dolly added, and forthwith burst into renewed weeping.

Fret yourself, Clarissa thought, Dear God, why should you fret yourself? You are old—old— You have nothing left to lose or gain. But I—

She turned from the house bitterly, sure in her heart she knew where he had gone. Where would he go, but to his precious brother? Where would he go, but to Gerald—for whose sake he had deflowered her? Love she could understand, but not this sort of love. Not love that knew no gain but its own betrayal, for another's sake.

She pictured him telling Gerald of that night, gloating over her yielding, her admitted passion. The blood swept up her face, and surged back to her heart, chilled by her hatred.

She thought, I shall overtake him. As there is a God above, I shall overtake him, and force him to my will.

Deep in her, she knew that he would yield, once she confronted him. He would yield because he could not withstand her, and his own passion. She would not need to use the other weapons she bore: his chivalry, when he knew that she was pregnant; the rumors that were sweeping London.

She knew now why he had so carefully shielded his back from her eyes. Tales of the Lambeth flogging flashed behind jeweled fans, leaping from startled tongues to shocked ears. Ajax Stacy had been lashed—lashed like a common long-shoreman, for a crime too foul to name.

Vane and Lord Brooke had denied the whispers openly. Clarissa, hearing Ajax had left England, believed far more than had been hinted.

She knew quite well what it must mean to her, but it did not turn her from her purpose. She would go to Virginia: not as she might have gone with Gerald, as the honored bride of a recognized planter, but as a common trollop might have gone, with even less honor than the shiploads of unwanted girls sent over in her childhood, and sold to the wife-hungry settlers for far less than the price of a steer, and that paid in tobacco. She, Clarissa Brinton, who might well have been "a little Queen," and had scorned the suggestion as cruel, would make that same journey in pursuit of a fugitive—and a fugitive who had used her and flung her away.

Yet she could not scorn herself for going. A quality long latent in her was coming to the fore, a determination, a driving force, an insistence on survival. Outwardly, she moved with small, uncertain steps, as a lady should, cloaking with lowered lids and an air of childish candor the clear-sighted realism that etched her course.

Aboard ship, old ladies sighed over her, putting away their disapproval of so young a maid taking such a journey unattended; and young men, overwhelmed with chivalry for her helplessness, refrained from pressing their suits until she might determine her will, safe on the land. And she moved among them delicately, pacing back and forth on the sloping deck, avoiding the piles of bedding the Captain had ordered aired on each clear day, in spite of the protests of the passengers that the dampness they absorbed swelled their joints and made them queasy. Her sea legs were as good as the crew's, now, but gentlemen still offered her their arms, and she still took them with an air of supreme helplessness, wondering the while what it would be like to stride free as a man along the wet and sloping deck, one with the sweeping motion of the ship, one with the cold

wind that whipped her bright curls from her hood's confinement. Sometimes, she wished the voyage might never end. More often, she fretted she was not a man, to move as she would through an adventurous world, gaining what she could, destroying as she went: a man powerful and strong and ruthless as Ajax.

She had been lucky in her sailing time. Even the acrid sharpness of vinegar with which the quartermasters daily swabbed the cabins and orlop did not bring too close the stark suggestion of the plague. The ship was half empty, for the great sailing season was September, when vessels raced each other and the equinoctials to arrive in time for the tobacco harvest. In that month, passengers and crew were "packed like herrings in a bucket," the Captain said, and though he did not tell her that, she knew that on most sailings one in five must die of plague before they made port. But sailing when she had, her lovely face and gentle breeding had won her a tiny cabin for herself—a privilege not assured a Duke, four months later, in the season.

If I had come four months later—she thought, and again began her feverish pacing, striving to escape the thought that was the fabric of her sleep or waking.

In four months, she would show her condition. Would they have refused her passage, as they did other unmarried women, whose pregnancy branded them undesirable settlers?

The lookout's yell split her brooding. She saw a man leap to the rail, dive. Before he struck water, another figure, scimitar curved, left the rigging, straightened, disappeared. A third, a fourth. The ship had slackened speed. The deck swarmed with crew and passengers, echoing the lookout's cry.

"Ambergris!"

She saw a grayish lump, the size of a man's head, and four men fighting toward it. Two, hopelessly outdistanced, turned back to the ship, cursing as they twisted their hairy arms in the rope flung over for them. The others closed

in toward the treasure that would make them free, and rich.

A woman, swifter-sighted than the others, screamed. Another fainted, and another covered her eyes with shaking hands. Clarissa, too, had seen the flashing knife. But she did not scream. She did not faint, or cover her face, or turn away. She leaned nearer, her quick breath drawn between her small bared teeth, her slender, pearl-knuckled fingers crushing the rail. So had the Roman ladies leaned above the Arena, watching with avid, eager eyes.

The ambergris lolled from a wave's crest to its trough. It rolled within the reach of the two men. But the hands of one had closed on his comrade's throat, and the hands of the other gripped the haft of a knife.

Aboard the ship, the master shouted orders. The men clinging to the rope plunged back into the sea. But in that moment, only one man remained, clutching the ambergris against his body, and as he turned a widening streak of red marked his way.

His fellows hauled him aboard, and hoisted him over the rail. He fell at Clarissa's feet, his blood splashing her blown skirt and cloak. Still, she did not move. She stood staring down, wide eyes incredulous in her pale face.

The dying man looked up, and saw her so: white-faced and serene, the sun haloing her loosed curls to a vision.

"Madonna— Take it—for my sin—"

His grasp on the gray ball broke. It fell away, and the red streak gaped in his belly. His entrails gushed over Clarissa's shoes. He struck out convulsively, thrusting the ambergris to her feet.

Swift and accurate, Clarissa swooped. She neither touched nor looked at the dead man, but very daintily separated the treasure from the muck.

She was faint and whiter than death when she straightened. But no man offered her his arm, no woman hastened to assist her.

IV

IN ALL the days to come, she moved alone. But under her cloak by day, beneath her pillow by night, the dead man's ambergris was warmer comfort than a friend.

She could remember, smiling now, how she had once thought, *When the Stacy fortune is mine, I shall have rare perfumes, set in ambergris, like Charlotte's.*

The Stacy fortune—and one brother banished, and the other fled.

Charlotte—her beauty bloated in the Thames, beating at Black Fryers Stairs.

Ambergris—for a frail lady's perfumes, and two men dead of it.

But she— She, Clarissa Brinton, was alive. A thrill of power ran through her. Whatever came now, she need not grovel and plead. Whatever came now, she was rich. The gray, strange-smelling thing she cuddled night and day had freed her of the future. But beyond its value, the dying man had given her a greater gift. He had restored to her her pride, the pride that Ajax had destroyed. She was still the Blessed Lady, for whom men would die.

The realism that was alike her strength and weakness repossessed her. She knew it did not matter that she walked alone, now. She knew the world would truckle to her wealth long after it forgot how she had gained it. That was a human trait, as it was human to pretend to scorn what in reality one envied. She neither censured nor praised it. She merely accepted it, as true.

She had done nothing base, nor fraudulent. The man had given her his treasure of his own will, without her insistence or even suggestion. He had done it openly, before

them all. Whispering among themselves, not one of them suggested aloud that she should relinquish it.

That a man had been murdered in its gaining troubled her as little as that he, himself, had conveniently died. If he had not, doubtless, he must have been hung for murder. As for the fact of death, men died daily in the Orient, gathering pearls. But no one suggested ladies should not wear them.

She thought of many things she would do with her new wealth, of the independence it would gain for her—but strangely, however she fed her hatred with bitter thoughts, Ajax was always part of her plans. She never considered the possibility of abandoning her quest of him—of forgetting him altogether, and making a separate life for herself.

It did not occur to her that she might be in danger, and no one warned her it was so. The Captain nodded grimly as he passed her, the crew served her when they must, their weighing eyes concealed by sultry lids or averted faces. The passengers shunned her openly.

She thought, *It will be a few days at most. And ahead is all my life.* And she closed her eyes and lifted her face to the warm sun, and thought of Ajax, and the power her wealth would give her.

The night before they sighted land, she dreamed she lay again at Stacys Holding, and that Ajax was caressing her. Half-awake, deliciously aware, she felt his hand move over her warm flesh—and wakened.

The small, swinging lantern was no longer lit. The cabin was in utter darkness. Chilled by assurance more terrible than fear, she knew that she was not alone. She stifled the scream in her throat, and forced herself to think.

Again the stealthy hand moved over her. It was no lover's touch. She knew what it sought. She was no longer the Blessed Lady of the London drawing rooms, whose virginity was worth any price her whim might name. Men still might

sigh and languish for her body, but they would kill for her fortune. They would kill not alone each other. They would kill her as lightly. That was a chance that she must take to save it.

She twisted suddenly, pushed her treasure under her.

A great hand vised her neck, and yanked her upright. Her scream was stifled against a body thick with salt and sweat.

She retched at the stench, but still struggled to conceal the gray ball, thrashing the bedclothes with her legs, fighting and striking with all her strength against the unmoved bulwark of flesh.

She thought, *God in Heaven, why was I such a fool? Why did I not hide it, anywhere, instead of bedding with it, like a lover?* But almost within the thought she realized that would have been useless. She did not need the dawn to tell her that every inch, every nook, of the cabin had been searched, before this last effort had been made, risking her wakefulness. Whoever had taken this chance would not gamble on success.

Realizing that, she realized resistance was vain. She relaxed, suddenly, sharply, as if she had fainted. She heard the thief's surprised grunt, and thought for a moment he would loose her. Instead, as he laid her down, he slapped a pillow over her face, with the same gesture, holding it there while he ripped off the bedclothes, and found what he sought.

She knew he had found it, by the sudden quiet, the easing of the smothering weight upon her face. She gathered her strength, waiting.

But he did not go immediately, as she had expected that he would. He hesitated for a minute that seemed hours, while she lay stifling, fighting alike for breath and calm to carry through her plan.

Almost immediately she knew why he had paused. He was not risking his safety on her faint. It might be assumed, it might be light. She felt him fumble around her, realized

he had wound her in her cloak, and was tying it, so that she could not move. In another minute, he had gagged her with her scarf.

She heard him straighten, then. She heard his footsteps, padding on the creaking floor. She saw the widening slit of stars as the door opened. She put all her strength, all her fury and realization of the moment's meaning into a single effort. The carelessly made knots yielded. She flashed to the door, tearing the gag from her mouth, screaming as she had heard the lookout scream, "Ambergris! Ambergris!"

The deck was empty. No one came to her call. The ship still clove the water, its pace unchecked, swirling silvery phosphorescence as a dancer swirls her laces.

Clarissa thought, *I am mad. Or still asleep.* And screamed again, "Ambergris— My ambergris! It is stolen!"

A shadow came toward her. He held up his lantern, and she saw it was the watch. She started to tell him what had happened, sobbing and wringing her hands, fighting for control, her teeth chattering with cold and nerves.

Something in his immovable silence stopped her. Her words faltered. She was abruptly ashamed of her night rail, billowed around her knees, her wild hair, her distraught wailing.

It was as if he, a London wharf rat, had rebuked her for shrieking to high Heaven the loss of her brief fortune, when she had not wasted a sigh upon a man.

Distracted as she was and furiously angry, she knew now that her loss was absolute. It made no difference if every man aboard knew where her treasure was. She would never see it again. She had nothing to lose, now, but her pride.

She turned mid-word and went back to her cabin. She did not leave it again until she heard the lookout's cry, "Land-ho!"

Then she went out, looking neither to left nor right, staring into the horizon with hard eyes.

The mighty pines of Cape Henry rose like a mountain

from the sea. There was something unreal, frightening about their blue bulk. The offshore breeze swept down, heavy with the aromatic scent of unknown flowers. Nostalgia seized her. She wanted to cry out, to cover her head, to flee to her cabin, to yield herself utterly to self-pity and despair. Pride held her silent and motionless beside the railing, her lovely parted lips untrembling, her eyes level and unswerving, fixed on the unknown shore.

V

THE WORK at Feathergrant moved swiftly, now. Standing on the hill above his cabin, Gerald watched it going steadily forward, with a new, frank pride in the green shoots thrusting through the black soil, the widening clearing, the growing piles of lumber. Oak and pine were falling in a straight swath that would be a road. But already there was another road—a more significant one—a road to England, from his own door. Under Rawlins's guidance, his blacks had put up a staunch wharf as their first task, after the planting. Like the other planters, now, he was ready for the ships from home. They would come to him as they came to the plantations nearer the sea, bringing him supplies, taking his products: the pines, so tall they must be cut across before a ship could hold them; the oaks, sawn in planks and beams for His Majesty's Navy.

England had no oaks like these, now. The ships of Drake and Raleigh had taken them all. But Drake had driven back the Armada, and where there had been forests were ploughed fields, forever free as their memorial. And Raleigh's fragile filament, spun half around the world, was already strengthening to a web that would net an Empire. And over the seas freed by Drake, from the lands of Raleigh's dreaming, came the mighty oaks of virgin forests, and men like the oaks, of English stock, bred to England's need in the new land.

Gerald was so deep in his thought that the sound of a man riding at planter's pace startled him. He looked up, and discovered Rawlins, pulling in his horse, and peering under his hatbrim at the blacks in the field. As Gerald watched, he swung down and took a leaf from a young plant in his fingers, holding it to the sun, smelling it, nodding

quickly, his white teeth flashing in his brief smile. When Gerald hailed him, he looked up and waved and began to climb the hill.

"I didn't expect you up so early," he jibed, the sun squinting his eyes to a leer. He had not been to Feathergrant since his first visit, and his meaning was evident. Gerald determined to face it, once and for all.

"I take it you mean Nera. You seem to be interested."

"I am." Rawlins's grin was a nudge in the ribs. "When you're through with her—"

Gerald nodded curtly, and began to talk of the fields. He was not through with Nera—yet. But he knew it would not last. The black girl's lust lacked any quality of restfulness, except that won through exhaustion. Yet he was not through with her. Even today, drowsing in the dawn-dusk, he had dreamed of the night ahead. He already knew, however, that the time would come when he would be glad of Rawlins's offer. It would rid him of her without the necessity of selling her at a distance. He discovered uncomfortably that it was less easy to rid oneself of a woman one owned, in the wilderness, than to leave a free woman, in London.

Rawlins said suddenly, "Where are you planning to put the great house?"

Gerald stared around. Somewhere in the back of his mind he had known that he, like the other planters, must eventually have a home more enduring, more elaborate than the cabin, with its satellite shacks, that now satisfied him. He realized now that he had put the idea from him, and Rawlins's next question told him why.

"You haven't a lady to consult, I suppose?"

For a moment, Gerald could not answer. Resentment swept him, as Rawlins's eyes flicked him questioningly. He said, "What of it below there, in the curve of river?" and left the other question unanswered.

Rawlins laughed shortly. "And what happens, in time of spate?"

Gerald had not thought of the spate. He had not even thought ahead to winter, much less past it, to the spring. He remembered now the reports of mighty storms, of floods that swept away whole settlements, of great trees tossed like tinder on torrents grown from gentle streams.

He said, "God's final Name, doesn't a man ever get any peace here?"

"Not much, or often," Rawlins told him. "It's not a place men come to, for peace. If you wanted to die in an arm-chair—" He shrugged, letting the matter drop.

Gerald puzzled him more than any man he knew. Everyone in the colony knew the bare reason for his coming. But there was more, far more, than that to it, Rawlins felt. When he had first seen him, pale and drawn from his illness, he had felt that Gerald was not the man to live in a wilderness, with a handful of blacks. Now that he saw him recovered, now that the jauntiness, the poise and challenge and charm he had suspected, were apparent, he marveled. There had been more beneath his question about a lady than had been evident. There must be a lady, there must be many ladies, who would go even into a wilderness with Gerald Stacy.

He said, "You'd better thank Providence Wyatt's crazy notion that we must all build with brick petered out. It was enough to bankrupt a man, unless he wanted to start his own kiln. And if he did, who'd operate it?" He looked around appraisingly. "I believe you have enough cypress to do a pretty fine job. Unless you want a big place—"

"What would I do with a big place?" Gerald asked, and laughed suddenly. "Or do you mean the sort of place they call big out here: forty by twenty, with half-a-dozen rooms?"

"You'll find it's big enough, if you build on that scale," Rawlins warned. "It takes labor, remember—and that belongs to the land, first. Particularly, if you plant tobacco. It eats the life out of the ground, and you have to clear

more each season. But I suppose you will. You have enough land to use it and toss it away like a woman."

"I'm doing tobacco, now, of course. What I'll do next depends on how this comes out. I heard it was poor pickings last year."

"We starved through, and that was all." Rawlins spat, his face twisted angrily. "What's wrong with those madmen back home? Can't they realize their crazy laws are choking one of the biggest industries England ever had a chance to open up? What's wrong with the King, or Parliament, or whoever keeps yelling at us to send pitch and tar? Don't they know we haven't the horses or roads to get the trees to the kilns? And silk, my God, silk! Just because the climate's right for mulberries, we're supposed to baby-nurse a covey of damn worms! With our soil crying out for its natural crop, and all Europe fighting to get it, they restrict the number of plants we can grow, in order to force the price up, and set a standard of quality not one planter in three can meet, instead of letting us produce what we can, and sell as we can, and at least keep food in our mouths, instead of begging victuals of the Indians."

"I suppose," Gerald said slowly, "the tobacco will be a finer quality, in the end."

"And God grant we may survive to smoke it!" Rawlins snapped. His face had darkened, and he stared silently across the river for several minutes. "The trouble with this colony is they're trying to run the wilderness like London: it's choked with laws that half the settlers have never even heard of. We can't kill a wild pig, but we must pay half-as-much, again for tame cattle as they do at home, and then the wolves eat them. There's sense for you. Look here, you've come out recently. What are they trying to do to us?"

Gerald shook his head. He realized suddenly that no one in England had mentioned the colony, except as a source of wealth, or a possible haven for political or economic

undesirables, in longer than he could recall. For the rest, many persons of note had gone to it, for this or that reason to their advantage. But in spite of the high-sounding pamphlets that appeared every so often, no one with any power seemed to be at all interested in the colony's good, or the welfare of the colonists, except as pocket-fillers.

He said suddenly, "I think the truth is they're too mazed in their own difficulties, Rawlins." He looked around, and drew a deep breath. Warm as the air was, its clean fragrance seemed to reach deep into him, and wherever his eyes rested the tall serene trees rose majestically. In a flash he saw again the narrow dark streets of London, heard the shrill cries of the street vendors, the brittle laughter of drawing rooms. "They are like squirrels in a cage," he said slowly. "Struggling and striving, and neither knowing nor caring that all their effort is vain."

Rawlins said, "What about Laud? I've small will to stir him up, but we have suffered from one poor governor after another, coming and going. At least, the Archbishop has wit to master essential details. Possibly, a petition—" he stopped before the look on Gerald's face.

Laud. The word was like lightning from a clear sky. Gerald realized suddenly that he had not even thought of Laud in weeks. With Rawlins's comment, all the anxiety, all the resentment of his last days at Stacys Holding swept over him. He had wondered, bitterly, he had prayed often, about Ajax. Like a vision, at Rawlins's words, Ajax had risen before him, not laughing as he used to laugh, but grim-faced and serious, as he had been of late. Why had Laud's name brought Ajax so clearly before him? Fear, almost a superstitious presentiment, seized him.

He said shortly, "You came here before His Grace rose to power. I—was less fortunate. From a nearer knowledge, I would say that the details most interesting to him are prayer books and thumbscrews, and that he has small interest

in petitions, whatever their source." He began to walk rapidly toward the cabin, his lips tight.

After a moment, Rawlins followed. He had heard as much from others, not actually in government pay. It was not reassuring. Always, through the years of his apprenticeship and freedom, he had thought of England as secure, rooted in its ancient liberties. Even the bitterness of his poverty-stricken childhood had not effaced the memory of the gentle fields, the little bluebells in the hedgegrows. He had said to Gerald he would give all England for an acre of the new land. But now, deep in his heart, he knew it was not so. He knew that all the years he had been working, hoping, dreaming toward the hour when he would stand again in Lincolnshire, a free man, a man of substance. And he knew now that would never be.

Gerald turned quickly. "I spoke hastily. I would not offend you. You could not have known, but—"

"I should have known," Rawlins said. "I have heard it before." He paused, then the deeper cry broke from him. "But if it is so, what of England? What of the King?"

Gerald shook his head. "God knows," he said. "God alone knows."

VI

AJAX SCOOPED out a small spadeful of dirt, put two stinking fish heads in the hole, sifted over them the meager proportion of earth, and placed the stones separated from it in a basket. Then he straightened gingerly, clutching his aching back.

All his life, he had been used to strenuous exertion in wind and sun, but a misery had crept from this unwilling soil, and touched him with cold malice. For days, the lumbar muscle had protested, but Governor Winthrop's admonition, "in the sweat of man's brow shall he eat," drowned out the protest.

Straight to the rocky coast, in the neatly squared and fenced fields, he could see other figures, kneeling or squatting about similar tasks. Most of them were lads, too young to handle a boat, fishing, or hew trees, or plough, but they worked with a tight-lipped intensity born of memory of the past winter's starvation, and a mature intention to prevent its repetition. There was never a Day of Fast or of Thanksgiving when their elders did not repeat to them, like the Israelites of old, the tale of their fathers' sufferings, in the early winters of the colony, and when tired bodies rebelled at their tasks, or the grateful warmth of midsummer sired daydreaming and inactivity, those stories returned to mind, and shamed them into renewed and uncomplaining effort. They were learning to live as their God had intended, in the land he had given them: Six days shalt thou labor, and the seventh is the LORD's. And as they learned, unwittingly, they mortised together with their toil and patient suffering and faith a foundation for a nation great beyond their dreaming, which would stand while courage and self-discipline and righteousness prevailed.

At Stacys Holding, had he felt such pain as now seized him, Ajax would have lain on the great oak bed and yelled if Tanker crossed the floor: but already the mark of this land was upon him, imperative and challenging and final. Once you had known this land, once you had conquered it, you discovered you had paid for that conquest with your life, for it possessed you with a passion that made more facile soil seem cheap. So, thought Ajax, Boadicea would have seemed, next to a dimpled dairymaid. He nodded, and lowered his eyes again to his work.

The little Gerald, squatting beside him, carefully filled his pudgy hands with the discarded pebbles, and dropped them neatly in the hole.

"Hell!" roared Ajax, and began digging them out again, hand over hand, like a dog.

A woman paused, with a rustle of sad-colored skirts. "Oh, no," she admonished, and shook her finger at Gerry. Ajax, seeing it slantwise through guilty eyes, was convinced it was the sort of finger Will Shakespeare had meant by "choppy." She was smiling with bleak intensity at the child, and Ajax realized gratefully that she intended charitably to ignore his outburst. He straightened, swallowing another ejaculation as the pain in his back caught him, and smiled back with equal bleakness.

"Good day, Mistress," he said. "I—I suppose children are like that."

"Children are what their elders make them. Unless they are guided by upright example and disciplined into a sense of righteous responsibility, we cannot expect them to be young plants, nor shining corners. As the twig is bent, Master Stacy, as the twig is bent."

Ajax looked up at her doubtfully. She was a frail woman, wasted with a lingering illness, but there was a vitality of conviction in her words, belying the almost mocking light in her eyes. Ajax, versed in women, found he was rather sorry for Mistress Bradstreet. Was it possible she was torn

between some secret doubt, and outward acceptance of conventional standards?

Gerry, however, felt no hesitation in expressing his opinion. He flung back his head and crowed with unregenerate laughter. Ajax exclaimed, "No, no, Gerald. You must listen and learn from Mistress Bradstreet. You—you want to be a young plant, don't you?"

"No," said Gerry instantly and firmly. "Don't want."

"He doesn't know what he's saying," Ajax apologized quickly.

"Do know. Don't want plant *any* more. Want see Comp'ny march."

"The Company," said Mistress Bradstreet, "is not marching. It is not Monday." She half knelt beside Gerald. "Unless you plant, you will not reap. Unless you reap, you will not eat. Un—"

"Want eat," said Gerald. "Want eat, *now*." He began to jump up and down. "Now, *now*, NOW!" he shouted. He eyed her speculatively. "Gewwy scweam!" he warned, and suited action to the word.

Mistress Bradstreet straightened. "That child should be taken in hand at once, Master Stacy. I know whereof I speak. The wilderness makes servants insolent, and children unruly. A negligent youth is attended by an ignorant middle age, and both by an empty old age."

Ajax murmured, "It was only a few pebbles, Mistress," but Anne Bradstreet was not to be put off by this *non sequitur*.

"A few pebbles have more than once been responsible for a strong man stumbling and falling by the wayside," she said, and the look in her eyes as she emphasized this hint recalled Ajax's recent lapse. "How old is the boy, Master Stacy?"

Ajax stared. "Why— I don't believe I know."

"But I thought he was your brother's son!"

"He is. But the fact is—" Ajax gulped, abruptly aware

this was not the moment to disclose facts. "My brother is in the Virginia Colony. And the child's mother failed to confide his age to me."

"But surely, Master Stacy, you must recall when the boy was born!"

"My brother and I—have been separated for some time."

Pity sprang into Anne Bradstreet's eyes. "Poor brat! Alas, how good a thing it is for brothers to dwell together in amity!"

"My brother and I—" But he could not go on. He could not tell Anne Bradstreet, or any other living soul, what he and Gerald had been to each other. Every hour of every day he hungered more for him. He put out his hand, and took Gerry's strongly. It was as if he said, We understand each other. That suffices.

Gerry nudged the back of his head into Ajax's shoulder and from that stronghold stared inimically at Mistress Bradstreet.

"He looks to be about the age of my Sarah," that lady said, "it is time he was set to learning."

"I agree it is time he learned many things. At his age, I had already a steady seat in a saddle, and—" he stopped, before Mistress Bradstreet's disapproving look. "I have been trying to teach him to plant fish heads," he amended, somewhat lamely.

Mistress Bradstreet overlooked the irony in his tone. "He should be sent to the Reverend Cotton for instruction in the Word, and a groundwork of Latin and his letters. I shall see to the matter immediately."

She hurried off, her thin body bent with haste, coughing a little with the effort, but warmed by a sense of her good works.

Ajax watched her, then bent to his task, carefully placing two grains of corn and three of wheat in the hole, and powdering the remaining earth on it. There was something symbolic in this Indian planting, this urging increase of the

sterile soil, with seed too precious to waste. It contrasted starkly with the lavish sowing of Buckinghamshire, the rooting out and discarding of young plants that crowded too close together. Here, young plants were of priceless worth; here, the Biblical comparison had new significance. He glanced at Gerry and thought of Mistress Bradstreet.

He wondered why God in His wisdom had ever seen fit to put more inside a woman's skull than outside of it, where feminine adornment so obviously belonged. He had been in the colony less than a week, but already he marveled at the unsettling mental activities of the ladies of Boston. And though he had heard that Mistress Bradstreet's accomplishments had been overshadowed in their time by those of the redoubtable Mistress Hutchinson, he was constrained to admit that they eclipsed those of any lady still in the Bay. Doubtless, her natural shortcomings—her gifts, rather—had been exaggerated by her childhood training at Tattershall, the seat of the Earl of Lincoln; and doubtless that, also, was responsible for what seemed to him a frenzied eagerness to overcome the crudities of the wilderness with intellectual polish.

Where had such women kept themselves in England? Vaguely, he had known they existed, with their disquieting knowledge of history and half a dozen languages, their unseemly political opinions. But either by chance or subconscious intention, their paths had not crossed, though socially and financially they were of his own grade.

Again, he realized sharply that England was divided less by classes than by opinions, the difference being more deeply rooted than Laud's arrogance or the Separatists' rebellion. These were symptoms, become of late so conspicuous they appeared to be the disease itself. But the same unrest had stirred in the hearts of their grandsires, and would trouble the sleep of their sons. It was the essential characteristic of a free people: the forming of independent opinion, the

maintenance of conviction at the cost of life. When the opinion of a vast group was formed by its leaders, when men followed blindly, too careless or too fearful to oppose powerful factions, the people were no longer free.

Ajax realized suddenly he had ceased working, staring out at the forest fringed horizon, thinking. The cold wind that sprang up with every sunset was making Gerry shiver. He swung the boy to his shoulder, his lips tightened against the stab of pain.

"Want see boats," Gerry announced, twisting his fists in Ajax's hair, and so braced, straining toward the cliffside.

Ajax obediently turned through Sentry Lane to Market Street. The fine big house on the corner, built by the Hutchinsons before Anne's banishment, always gave him a pang of homesickness. It was here she had held her meetings, with as many as seventy persons at a time listening to her discourses and marveling at her understanding and tolerance. It was here Vane had seen her first, here the spark kindled in him by the high-handed College of Oxford had been nursed to a flame that might reach as far as Whitehall. Remembering Vane's eyes, feeling again his intensity, Ajax was once more in England. He recalled the injunction Vane had set upon him. Some day, he must go to Aquidneck, Isle of Errors, and tell Anne Hutchinson of Vane. He wondered how she would receive the message, what she would be like, that middle-aged woman, who had so effortlessly ensnared a man like Harry Vane, when lovely, younger ladies had failed to win him.

He turned from the market square, and passed between the houses set in English gardens of white-satten, eglantine, and many-petaled roses. Of unpainted wood, of wattle-and-daub, with their high-pitched thatched roofs and great chimneys of brick or stone, they were English to their roof-trees, even without the second story overhang, or small case-ments, with leaded diamond-shaped panes. By windows such as those, English faces had been framed for centuries, and

here, as ever in Devon or Buckingham, they were still framed.

Gerry cried, "Cow, cow!" and began bouncing on Ajax's shoulder, causing him to yelp with pain.

Ajax curbed the natural expletive which stung his tongue, and forced a smile. "Yes," he said, "nice cow. Those are the governor's," and he paused to admire the fine Winthrop herd, browsing among the blueberry bushes, in search of the meager salt grass that contrasted so ill with the lush meadows of England. Already, he looked on cattle with something approaching reverence, calculating every firkin of milk, every pound of butter or cheese, with which the kindly beasts would bulwark the colony against starvation. If a cow fell sick, it was a matter for anxiety. If it died, it was a calamity reflected in every household. He felt a deep and genuine interest in their welfare, but it was immediately evident that Gerry did not share it.

He tugged his hair, and shouted, "Boats, *boats*, BOATS!" and swung as far toward the harbor as his meager anchorage permitted.

In self-defense, even as he dutifully reproached Gerry for impatience, Ajax turned toward the waterfront.

Below, a dozen small boats raced to harbor. The creak-clot of the oars, the sound of the men's singing, rose on the crisp air. Ajax recognized their song. It was the song that had swept over England, gathering the Puritans from hall and market and castle, for the first migration, a generation before:

"Then for truth's sake, come along,
Leave the place of superstition,
Were it not for we that bretheren be
You'd sink into perdition.
When we that are elected
Arrive at this fair country,
Which by our faith, the bretheren saith,

We need not fear our entry—
The psalms shall be our music,
Our time spent in expounding—”

A thrill ran through Ajax as he listened to the fine old tune, rising and falling with their bending and breathing.

At the wharves, lay three ships. One was from the Indies, one landed today from England. The third had brought him and Gerry, the week past. When it sailed with the outgoing tide, it would snap his last tie with home. He wondered if the others felt as he did, seeing their ships go home. If so, they never said so. The ships left, but the people remained. They remained through plague and massacre and famine, and watched their ships go home.

Gerry reached up. He stroked Ajax's cheek, and laid his own against it. Ajax's arms tightened around him fiercely, and he turned from the waterfront. The thing against which he had closed his heart had entered in. He had been betrayed by a child's tenderness and the thought of home. From the hour when he had left Stacys Holding, he had not allowed himself to think of Clarissa. Always she had been there, just out of his consciousness, like a player waiting breathless and tiptoe in the wings, but with all of his will power, he had withheld her cue. Now, she had entered without it, and torn apart the whole false fabric of the farce. He knew that without Clarissa there was no play. All of his life had come to completion in the hour that he had held her in his arms. When he had gone from her he had known that he would never fully live again.

Yet he had gone. He had gone, not as he had intended going, less in fear of Laud than in protest, hurrying as a free man to build a new life in a new land, among others who counted freedom above comfort. He had gone madly, driven as a leaf before the wind, covering his eyes and his ears lest she should come to a window, or call out, knowing that if she did he must return, though to return were death.

He had fled from Clarissa rather than Laud, and fleeing, had taken her with him. He had thought himself free of her, through the eight weeks on shipboard, while they swayed through a week's calm in the trough of rollers as long as Stacys Holding, while they crashed through storms, and the dark waves rose to combers, suddenly pale against a yellow sky, and banged on the deck, and the ship screamed and shuddered under their weight. Now, he knew that always, forever, Clarissa would go with him, as his heart went with her.

What was she doing? When she had found him gone—When she had returned home—When she had realized at last he had left her, would never return—Now, this moment, as he strode through the narrow, irregular street Cotton had striven so lustily to straighten, was she sitting with other gentlemen in her exquisite small drawing room and thinking of him, with hatred—or with passion?

Knowing women as he did, he had never imagined Clarissa a passionate woman. He had been amazed when she returned his kisses, and believed she would refuse his command to come to him. When she had cried out in her ecstasy, and he had covered her mouth with his that the servants might not hear that precious confession, he had been awed, incredulous, as a worshiper granted the vision he has prayed for.

Yet he had left her. He had—

"Uncl' Ajax! No, p'ease, no!"

Gerry's whimpering protest, and wriggling descent from his arms, recalled him.

"Did I hold you too tight? I'm sorry. I forgot I was holding you," he apologized, and reached over for the child's hand. But Gerald tossed his chin, and cast up a swift reproachful glance, and marched off, unattached. "I forgot," Ajax repeated, and looked around, like one awakening.

He had forgotten so much: the brilliant sky and great elms and hemlocks, the neat, upright houses, the stockade. Laud and the plight of England, and even the child he had

sworn to care for. And Gerald. Gerald, who also loved Clarissa.

But Gerald had never had Clarissa. Gerald could not know, could not suffer as he did. Ajax clenched his hands, and the sweat ran over his face.

"Thank God," he said, "Thank God for that, anyway."

VII

GERALD DREAMED that Suckling's regiment was riding him down. He saw the flashing scarlet and white of their uniforms, the tossing plumes, the laughing lips, the cold eyes. He heard their song, not quite muffling the chink of steel, and the sudden, terrible, insistent thunder of hooves. He started up, fighting the terror of sleep and the greater terror of waking.

The sound of his dreams palled everything. He stood for a moment trembling, remembering tales of stampeding herds, of hoof-churned earth and splintered shacks. He ran to the window and stared out. In the gray darkness he discovered the sound was not from the earth.

A blackish blue line bisected the dawn streak on the horizon. It spread out, out like spilled ink, flowing with terrifying swiftness.

"God!" His scream soared and shattered, the scream of a brave man aware at last of his impotence.

The thing he had heard was wings. They had neither size nor shape, only motion and sound. They surged onward like a great rushing wind. Because of them, there was no dawn.

Gerald fell on his knees, and covered his head with writhing hands, aware at last how high God is above His creatures.

Hepsibah ran in. She had heard his scream, and took his hands and raised him, crooning as if he had been a child. Gently she told him she had seen this same thing last year, and year before, when she had been working for Rawlins. She tried to speak calmly, but her eyes glittered and her fingers twitched. She told him that the first time she, too, had fallen on her face, screaming for mercy. Her words

broke, she ran out howling above the rising roar, shrieking with savage anticipation of slaughter and feasting. So soon had the miracle become a commonplace.

Gerald began to dress himself. He pulled on blue holland breeches, tightening the wide belt with shaking hands, and thrust his bare feet in oxbide shoes. Groping his way out, he stumbled over Nera, crouched on the threshold, staring at him through the dusk with opaque, unmoved eyes.

Hepsibah had urged the other blacks into a circle. Two were Africans like herself, but the others, from the Indies, were at first puzzled. Gerald, watching in the lessening twilight, could see them all waiting, quivering like leashed hounds. They grasped slings and clubs and behind them had been laid out every basket and pot on the plantation.

Suddenly, the pigeons were overhead. The roar of their flight was deafening. The blacks leaped and whirled, striking, aiming their slings where no aim was needed, screaming with rapture as their victims fell.

When the ground was covered, Gerald yelled to them to stop. They gave no sign of hearing. The blood lust was on them, it mounted to a frenzy. They moved as in a ritual, shrieking and moaning, swaying, undulating, leaping in the air. Gerald had never seen, never heard of the juba. Now, as the strange variation of it started, something of its primitive power and terror reached out, seized him. His breath caught in his throat, his mouth was dry, his bones shook.

The birds swept on, on, without beginning, without end, carrying the awful majesty of a vast and unknown land from space to space. Their droppings limed the neat small trees of the new orchard, erased the cabins, wiped the clearing from view. Only the mighty forest could withstand them, withdrawing into a blue enchanted darkness as the sun was blotted out.

The ground was heaped with them, fluttering and screaming, their bright feathers blood-smeared. Still the great flight swept on, unswerving and unwarned.

When night came, they roosted as they had for centuries, where and as they wished. Huge trees bent beneath their weight, and small trees broke.

The crouching blacks leaped forward. They lit a dozen fires. The confused birds rose, circled, dropped. The blacks beat and struck and slaughtered, slipping in their piled kill, stumbling, sleeping, rising, killing again.

The screams of the savages and their victims mingled hideously. With the new dawn, the plump breasts torn from living birds were spitted, and eaten while the blood still dripped on hissing fires.

The flight began again. The struggles and cries of the maimed birds, unable to rise, were pitiful. Gerald, who had seen men tortured, looked at the sky, still black to the horizon, knew there was no hope of delivery, and with horror closing on him like a madness, went into the cabin and flung himself on the cattail, and pulled the duffield over his head.

The heat increased. The pigeons lay heaped as they had fallen. The stench mingled with the heavy noxious smoke of burnt feathers, the luscious scent of crisp browned flesh.

After awhile, Gerald went outside, and vomited.

The day dragged on with no change of light, no lessening of sound.

That night, the glutton blacks slept where they fell.

The next day at sunset the flock had passed.

The dead birds rotted in the heat. The black soil lay beneath the ash and blood, receiving it into a fecundity to be brought forth centuries later in blood and ash.

VIII

CLARISSA HAD pictured herself going ashore, gracious and poised and lovely. She was sure that in so small a place she must see Ajax at once, and imagined how his friends would envy him, and the satisfaction she would feel, torturing him a little with refusal and uncertainty, before she yielded, secure, in her knowledge that other men's adoration was only whetting his passion for her. But when at last the ship docked, there was no moment of triumph, no gasp of incredulity as Clarissa Brinton stepped ashore. The passengers, so few days before her friends, had not noticed her since the incident of the ambergris, and now did not care if she was trampled in the surge of individuals, leaving or boarding the vessel, intent on their own ends.

Pressed against a wall, forgotten, she stared at the hurrying scantily clad planters, fighting through the mob, on the chance there might be one laborer or servant not indented, or else bonded by one of their neighbors since conveniently dead of heat or plague, and so liberated for another master. Beyond them, she saw the sweating blacks, naked but for breechcloths, straining under dressed lumber far longer and thicker than whole trees in England; traders haggling over the barter of the cargo for tobacco crops now hardly more than a green fuzz against black earth; frantic townspeople asking for relatives expected but not aboard; men eager only to hear the latest news from home.

Something struck her shoulder heavily, and she realized it was the carcass of a dressed deer, swung from a pole on the shoulders of two men so tall she did not reach to their armpits: her eyes slid up fearfully over the red bodies of the mighty Susquehannocks. They would have been giants in England, and people would have come from miles around to

stare at them, and touch them with tentative, incredulous fingers, testing their reality. Here, they passed unnoticed, members of a tribe long since a commonplace.

Staring around, she discovered other Indians: women, their tattooed arms and breasts brilliant above their bead-embroidered doeskin dresses; girls, naked but for a clump of moss pendant from embroidered belts. Suddenly a man appeared flashing blue lights with every motion. She cried out and shrank back, and discovered as he passed her that he was covered with the down of bluebirds, blown on his heavily oiled skin. A dozen necklaces of copper and pearls jingled as he walked, and his hair was shaven from the right side of his head, that on the left side being knotted in a clump adorned with the hand of a dead man, proof that his enemy was forever powerless.

Clarissa thought, *I'm dreaming. Or mad. Oh, God, have I gone mad at last?*

Someone touched her arm, and she jumped with terror, disbelieving the white face, the quiet English voice.

"Mistress, are these yours?"

Astonished, she saw the bag of netting, the little red lacquer chest she had brought from home. She had forgotten them, forgotten herself, forgotten even her fear, in the surging life of the new land, after the stark control of the last days at sea.

She said, "Yes. Yes—thank you," and then in a rush of returning emotion, "Oh, where is Master Stacy? Do you know where I can find him?"

"Stacy?" echoed the man. "Stacy?" and then, in sudden recollection, "Oh, the one that bought the black girl, at Shirley Hundred. Was he expecting you?"

Something in his tone held her. "No," she admitted, her lips dry. "No. But I must find him. He—he will be very glad I am come."

The man made a small ironic bow and set her things at

her feet. "I am very sure of that," he said. "I have not seen him, however. But Master Rawlins is herea^l outs. You can make the journey with him."

"The journey!" Clarissa echoed, "What journey?"

But the other had already gone, to find Rawlins. She sank on her chest, and began to weep silently. She had journeyed half across the world—and they spoke of further journeying. When Rawlins arrived, she could scarcely check her tears. Whether it was safe to go with him, what the outcome of all this might be, she did not question. She entered the log boat like one in a dream, watched his blacks cast off, maneuvering the clumsy craft agilely with their heavy paddles.

That night, they stayed at Wyanoke, and she was both amazed and piqued at Rawlins's apparent indifference. Surely, she thought, the ways of the wilderness were not the ways of London! By now, any gentleman at home would have been begging her favor, and if he did not know her reputation, confidently expecting her acquiescence. Rawlins, of course, was not quite a gentleman. His accent, his slight lack of ease, betrayed that at once. But there was about him an independence, a sense of authority, of assurance, entirely lacking in men of his class at home. She found herself liking him, as Gerald had done, and trusting him.

When he said quite abruptly, "I didn't know Master Stacy was expecting you," she did not resent it for prying, but answered honestly,

"He isn't. I refused to come, but I have thought better of the matter."

Rawlins nodded. The whole episode fitted in so perfectly with his theories about Gerald. They would be beautiful together, these two. He felt a sudden warm pride in them, and the part they would play in the new country.

Moreover, it opened the way for a project dear to his heart. He said, "I have a sister in Lincolnshire. I've never seen her, for she was born after I left. I've wanted since she

was grown to bring her over, but have thought the place too lonely for a maid not turned twenty. But now you've had the courage to come—"

Clarissa moved her hand deprecatingly, and her small wistful smile flashed. "I hope you will bring her. But as for my courage— Sometimes, it takes more courage to stay than to come."

He leaned forward. "What is happening in England? Will there be no end to the turmoil?"

"Who knows? I have small knowledge of politics, Master Rawlins. I was not referring to them, but to—a more private matter. I am under no ban, but have come of my own will, I do assure you."

"I am sure of it," Rawlins said. "Even His Grace would be loath to persecute so lovely a lady."

Clarissa's spirits rose. She felt that the tall, long-faced man who looked at her so seldom and so swiftly nevertheless made good use of such glimpses as he allowed himself, and determined to fascinate him, unaware that he was thinking less of her than of a black girl, and congratulating himself that Clarissa's coming would fling Nera into his arms before he had dared hope.

He was so eager for the outcome that he would have gone ashore, taken her back with him, had not an inherent delicacy warned him that the meeting between Clarissa and Gerald should be unwitnessed. But as he stepped on Gerald's landing, he could not control the quick look of triumph and expectation toward the cabin.

Clarissa, however, felt neither triumph nor expectation. The small clearing, the towering forest beyond, appalled her. All along the river, she had seen such clearings, but of them all, this was the newest, the smallest. Her startled eyes swept it, discovered the mean cabin, the straggling shacks, the shining points of black light, where the sweating Negroes labored, catching the last rays of the sun. She was about to

protest, when a gust of wind, heavy with the stench of rotting flesh, gagged her words in her throat.

Rawlins said, "It's the pigeons. They passed four days back, and it's been hot, since." He spoke indifferently, as if that explained everything.

She pulled a scarf across her nose and mouth, unable to answer. Standing so, she heard a shriek, instinct with the jungle, and saw a huge Negress, stumbling down the bank. She cringed, but Rawlins caught her arm, reassuringly.

"She's one of my niggers. She'll take care of you. You mustn't fear her." He braced himself for the onslaught, but Hepsibah, seeing Clarissa, came to a skidding stop, like a horse too quickly pulled in. "Where's Master Stacy?" Rawlins asked, and Hepsibah answered almost sullenly, eyes fixed on Clarissa.

"Top fiel', plowin'n'plantin', like always."

The wind swept them again, and Rawlins cursed roundly, "Why haven't the boys seen to those goddamn pigeons?"

Hepsibah's eyes flickered to him momentarily, her lower lip thrust out. "Lias he busy top fiel' long Mas' Stacy, 'n' Han'bal he up river blazin' logs." She spat emphatically. "Indies boys not much good, but they settin' up orchard goddamn pigeons broke."

Rawlins's lips twitched. He glanced at Clarissa, but she was past noticing humor. When the wind checked, she took a long breath, and was scarlet with the effort of holding it while the breeze blew. Rawlins said, "Tell the boys to burn or bury those cadavers or they'll bury each other, with the plague. But take Mistress Brinton to the cabin, first, and fetch Master Stacy to her." He stooped, pulled a bottle of Madeira from his store, and put it in Clarissa's hand. "Our trade brings us finer wines here than in England. Ask Master Stacy to drink my health with yours. I shall call to pay my respects tomorrow. And don't be downcast, Mistress Brinton. It's a sweet land now—and it will be a great one."

He stepped into the boat. His blacks plunged paddles in the river. Before Clarissa could cry to wait, they were in midstream, singing. The music's tempo, the tuneless tune, slipping from minor to minor, webbed her more awfully than before in a sense of nightmare.

The big Negress had taken her arm, was half guiding, half dragging, her up the hill, between the slimy heaps of putrid birds. When she could no longer go forward, they stopped beside a pair of blacks cutting down a live oak. Suddenly, scarlet liquid spurted from it, splattering their sweaty bodies and the ground at her feet. *Good God, she thought, what is this land where even the trees gush blood?*

Hepsibah was screaming at the woodcutters for their carelessness. Clarissa caught up her skirt and began to run, stumbling, breathless, half mad with heat and terror and despair.

Tomorrow, she thought, tomorrow I shall return. No man's love, no woman's reputation is worth this! But even as she thought it, the sense of her poverty and helplessness swept her. Yet she recalled that even in the hours of her brief wealth she had planned no life without Ajax.

She heard Hepsibah, panting heavily behind her, and strove to hurry, but her slim high heeled shoes slipped in the soggy earth, and picking her way lest she fall in the muck, she could not outdistance her. She felt the great hand close on her arm like a trap, and cried out in helpless protest.

Hepsibah did not notice. She had been instructed to take Clarissa to the cabin, and to find and deliver Stacy to her. At any cost, she would do these things. Tomorrow, when Rawlins returned, as he had said that he would, she would beg to go back with him. Nera had been sufficient trial. This white woman, with her peaked pale face, her small useless hands, her way of looking at a man, would be worse, even, than a black girl who must be pampered.

She left Clarissa at the door of the cabin, and started trudging uphill again.

Clarissa grasped the jamb, striving to accustom her eyes to the darkness inside. Little by little she picked out a rough-hewn table and calfskin chair, a gleaming chest of mahogany with a pewter bowl and ewer, and above, a small oval mirror, in an olivewood frame. Beyond, in the dimness, the four posts of the bed rose gallowslike, the draped outline of the mosquito cloth ghostly between them.

Slowly, reluctantly, Clarissa advanced, as if she already knew and dreaded the thing that she would see.

Nera lay on the bed, naked, and asleep. Against the green kiddermminster cover, she seemed master-carved of ebony. In her hand, across the sharp nipples of her savage pointed breast, lay a draggled golden feather.

For a long minute, Clarissa stood staring at her. The phrase beat through her mind, over and over: "The one who bought the black girl at Shirley Hundred," "who bought the black girl." . . . With a small sob, she caught herself. It wasn't Ajax. Not Ajax, whom she was seeking. It was Gerald. The golden feather proved that. Oh, thank God, thank God, she hadn't married him—"the one who bought the black girl—"

She turned, hurried outside, began to run, stopped.

Gerald was coming over the hill. For a moment he stood silhouetted there, his magnificent torso sunbrowned above his blue pemistone breeches, his strong feet thrust stockingless into oxhide shoes. He ran with his head thrown back, and the sun bronzed his shortened curls.

Clarissa thought, *He has changed. He's as wild as the others. And then, Ajax. Ajax will have changed, too. This will have happened to him, also.* Her long, deep heartbeats almost choked her.

Gerald stopped running. He had seen her. The thing that Hepsibah had told him was true. It could not be true—but it was. Clarissa stood before him. Not his dream of her, not her spirit—but Clarissa in the very flesh.

He advanced slowly, his eyes incredulous, his arm out-

stretched like a sleepwalker's. Clarissa, seeing the look in his face, tried to draw back, tried to explain, before he could take her in his arms, that she sought Ajax. In that moment, she thought that if he kissed her, with the black girl's kiss still on his lips, she would die, or kill him.

But he did not kiss her. He did not take her in his arms, or even touch her. He stood a few feet from her, staring at her as the dying sailor had, as if she were a holy thing, as if she were, indeed, the Blessed Lady.

Then with a strangled sob he flung himself at her feet, and pressed his shaking lips to her small, worn shoe.

IX

CLARISSA SAID sharply, "Don't!" and Gerald, with a shame-faced smile, rose slowly to his feet. She thought, *He's mad, to imagine I followed him, to dream I came across the world to beg his forgiveness, to plead with him to take me, now.* She said, "Gerald—" but the look in his eyes stayed her.

He ran a gentle, sensing hand over the curve of her throat and cheek.

"You came. Clarissa. You came—after all." He flung up his head, and a great cry of wonder and triumph broke from him. "God! How you must have loved me!"

She stared around, like an animal seeking escape, her quick, nervous tongue wetting her dry lips. Fear, above any she had yet known, touched her. "You are alone, here?" She could hardly force the whisper.

Gerald laughed. His laugh rang out as it once had, over the hills of Stacys Holding. "No!" he cried, "No longer, my Clarissa."

She made an impatient motion. "I mean—except for me—and the black people— Gerald— There must be someone— There is—someone, isn't there?"

Her frenzy reached him. He looked around, as he had not in weeks, realized how Feathergrant must seem to Clarissa. He said quickly, "We have a neighbor. Rawlins. The one you came with."

"No one—else?"

"Darling— Oh, my sweet love—try to be contented—just for a little. Clarissa, it is a good land. You will know that, later. When I first came I felt as you do. I was ill, then—very ill. Clarissa, you must never be ill! Promise me you will never be ill— I would die, if you suffered, for loving me. I love you so terribly—"

She hardly heard him. She had closed her eyes, and was leaning against him, in ultimate weary yielding. She knew, now. Ajax was not here. He had not come to Gerald after all. He had tricked her in this, as in all the rest. She had not the strength to go on fighting. She would have to marry Gerald, to live. She would have to let him go on believing that she loved him, deceiving him waking and sleeping, with a show of affection, so that he might never suspect the child she carried was not his.

She had thought, even in her extremity, to bring the Stacy men to heel, to make Ajax believe she was forcing him to marry her simply as penance for his humbling her, making him pay with a lifetime for that night's pleasure. Indulging herself, she would have made him beg for her favors, and taken from him the joy of her yielding, by making him think she gave herself to him grudgingly. Now, she knew that Ajax had eluded her, half believing he had sent the message to Dolly simply so that it might be relayed to her, deliberately misleading her.

Gerald noted her silence at last, her white, drawn face. He said, "You are tired. Of course, you are tired. Clarissa, I'm a beast, I'm no more than a savage myself, I'm—"

"Yes," she said, "Yes. I'm—very tired."

He drew her back to the cabin, before she could protest. Nera, awakened by their talk, was sitting up. In the darkness, the white circles of her eyes glittered distrustfully.

Gerald went forward, lit a candle before he realized she was there. For a moment, no one spoke. Then he said harshly, "She's—she's Rawlins's. He's taking her back with him, tomorrow. Did he speak of her—to you?"

"No," said Clarissa, "He never mentioned her."

She wondered if Gerald believed she believed him. She glanced at him covertly, as he took the girl by the arm, thrust her outside, shouted for Hepsibah to take her. She swung around and bit him, as she had Rawlins, and, breaking from him, ran off screaming and sobbing wildly.

Gerald returned, with a sort of false dignity making him seem suddenly pompous. He stooped and picked the feather from the floor, frowning at it. She said plaintively, "Do you remember—your hat on my chair, Gerald? I asked you then what had happened to it. You never answered me."

"No," he said. "No. There are a lot of things I never answered you, Clarissa." He crossed to her, and knelt before her where she sat in the cowhide chair. "Clarissa— There may still be many things I cannot answer. But you loved me enough to come. Clarissa, for God's sake go on loving me, and believing in me. No matter what happens, believe that I never loved any other woman but you. You see— It's just we two, Clarissa—against all this. Together, we can do anything, anything. But if we ever doubt each other, it will destroy us."

Suddenly, she knew what he meant. It. The land. The terrible, mysterious, unboundaried land. Men who flashed blue lights as they walked. Trees that were saplings when the Conqueror swept England. Rivers black with fish, skies black with birds.

Gerald had said, "If we doubt, it will destroy us." Gerald had said, "We two . . . together. . . ." She knew she must marry Gerald, to live. She knew Gerald must never doubt.

Her breath shuddered through her, and she raised her face. "Gerald, you do want me, don't you?"

"Want you? I—want you? Oh, Clarissa. Oh, my darling."

He took her in his arms, then, but not with the passion she had expected. His lips were on her hair, not her lips. She thought, *But he must! He must! What of the child? If Gerald suspects—* She clung to him, pressing to him.

Gerald said, "Clarissa, don't. I—I can't stand it." He put her out of his arms gently, his laugh shaking.

"But you said— You said you wanted me—"

"Wanted you! God's final Name, Clarissa—" his voice broke, between anger and helplessness. He shrugged and turned away. "Clarissa, sweetheart— If you knew more about

men— Clarissa, only believe that it is because I do want you that— Oh, for God's sake, Clarissa, let me go!"

"Go? Go where? Are you mad?"

"Very nearly," he admitted ruefully. They stared at each other a long minute. Then he crossed to her, and took her hands. His clasp was gentle, firm, as if she were a child, and he spoke as if to a child. "Clarissa, don't tempt me, until— until I can take you rightfully. You trusted me, enough to come to me here. Don't make me fail you, Clarissa. If I did, I'd hate—myself, always." She knew that for a moment he had almost said, "I'd hate *you*." She thought, *What are these Stacys? Do they really care more for ideas than facts?* But immediately, her half contemptuous thought broke before Gerald's words. He said, "Clarissa, do you know why I spoke as I did to you, in London? It was because—because I knew that you loved me, and I thought you were going to sell your birthright for a mess of pottage. It destroyed the only thing I had left, Clarissa—my faith in you, in your rightness and courage—and purity. I knew you must marry, of course. And if you married another man, while you loved me, simply because he could give you physical safety, you would be like all the others—only a little less courageous than they, because you would require the safeguard of marriage—"

"Don't! Gerald— Please—"

"Oh, darling— Sweetheart— Clarissa, forgive me! I know now that even in my thoughts I should never have blasphemed you so. But— You cannot imagine what hell it was. And that is why—why I cannot fail you, my Clarissa. If I did, you must suffer as I suffered. Do you see?"

"But, Gerald— Tomorrow— Surely, tomorrow—"

He laughed, kissed her lightly, gaily. "Why, Clarissa! Who would imagine that you, you of all ladies, would press so delicate a matter? I swear that any man in London would have taken oath you'd postpone and postpone his happiness until the banns grew cold! It must be the wilderness has

got into your blood already, my precious, my adorable savagel!"

"Banns!" She stared at him, alarm striking through her. "Banns—in the wilderness?"

"I shall tell Rawlins tomorrow to have the banns published come Sabbath. He goes to town far oftener than I."

"Gerald— But— With all this, when *are* you going to wed me?"

"The very first moment I can contrive. Have no fear of that." He patted her hands lightly and, loosing them, took her face between his hands, and kissed her forehead. "If you knew more of such matters, my Clarissa, you would realize it will be sweeter for the waiting," he said, and left her.

She sat staring into the darkness, beyond the small circle of the candlelight. It was symbolic: this moment's assurance, this moment's rest, and beyond, all her life, all the wilderness.

A silhouette blotted the doorway. One of Gerald's blacks bent, entered, laid her little lacquer chest at her feet, bowed with savage homage, backed into the encompassing darkness. She stared at the scarlet and gold trifle with bitterness born of impotence. In that small compass was all that she possessed. Dowerless and pregnant, she had come into the wilderness. Her hands clamped the chair arms, her quivering lips straightened. She went to the door and called Hepsibah.

"Those birds," she said. "They must be burned or buried tonight. Do you understand? When dawn comes there must be no trace of them." She caught her breath, steadying her voice. "And tell that black girl to hush her screaming." She turned away, catching the chair for support, but the back Hepsibah saw was erect.

After awhile, Nera's shrieks faded, ceased. The shuffling sound of bare feet, the scratch of hoe and spade, the crackle of fire, the purging smoke scent, entered the cabin. Clarissa, standing before the chest of drawers, leaning on her clenched hands, peered at her reflection in the small mirror. It seemed uncertain, wavering in the blown candlelight, but even as

she looked, the flame steadied, throwing clear light and strong shade across her face, thrusting into sharp relief set lips and level eyes. Gerald had said in London that she would be "a little Queen."

"And I shall," she promised herself. "As there is a God to judge me, I shall."

X

CLARISSA HAD married Gerald. Casting down her eyes, advertising her modesty and virginity, with Ajax's child in her womb. Praying God it would not be premature, that it might even come late in time. Such things happened to other women, women to whom it did not matter, to whom a week, a fortnight, might not strike the balance between life and death.

That it was life and death Gerald proved every time he spoke to her, every time he touched her hand. His belief in her was the foundation of all that he was or hoped to be. Whatever threatened it would strike at the root of his life, and he would destroy the destroyer, even as he was destroyed. While she took the vows she despised, Clarissa thought, *I shall never be free again. All my life, with every word and breath, I shall have to feed his vanity, to make him believe I crossed the world for love of him.*

She must feed his vanity, because it had been eight weeks since she had lain in Ajax's arms. Ajax. Where was he? What had befallen him? Gerald did not even know he had left England. She had made sure of that, while she hastened the banns, pleading for permission to wed before the lawful time. She even upbraided Gerald for his loyalty, after all he had suffered from Laud; but he had smiled to soften his persistence, and told her, "The man is not the Church, Clarissa. Long after Laud is dead, the Church will remain. It is the only permanent factor in the changing world. And when I marry you, I am marrying you for all the years."

All the years. She felt their weight pressing on her. All the years, until she died, she would be Gerald's wife.

She must begin to guard against self-betrayal, against the day—tomorrow? next year?—when Gerald came to her with

news of Ajax. The knowledge would fall like a blow, when she least expected it. Of that, she was already sure.

Rawlins accompanied them, riding back with them from Jamestown. When he left them, a silence fell between them, though Gerald urged his horse nearer, and covered her hand with his. In the twilit hush, she felt the wilderness close around her like a prison, and for the first time the full impact of this hour's meaning surged over her.

Gerald felt her trembling, and leaning to her saw her fluttering lids and white face.

"Clarissa—you aren't afraid?"

She shook her head, and strove to smile, murmuring faintly, "No. No—I am not afraid."

But when at last they reached Feathergrant, and reined their horses at the cabin's door, she said almost wonderingly, "How strange, that I should leave home, and come to the wilderness to wed."

Gerald dismounted, and went to her quickly. "Clarissa," he said, "This isn't the wilderness any longer. This is home, now." He searched her eyes, but could discover no answering light in them. He bent his head and touched his lips to the new ring on her finger. "Clarissa—this is home, because you are my wife."

"Home," she repeated, but the word was cold, experimental. Then, suddenly, triumph swept her. Home. Wife. She was safe. Whatever happened, now, all they would ever know in England was that Gerald Stacy's true love, Clarissa, had followed him to Virginia, and there wed him, with all the decent rites of the Church. Ajax would hear that. "Home!" she said, and raised her head exultantly.

Gerald lifted her down. His mouth was fierce on hers, as he carried her over the threshold. In the relief of her security, she almost welcomed his arms, hard and strong, clasping her against him so that the fine silver buttons of his camlet coat bit into her soft flesh.

Then he set her down. She opened her eyes. They swept the familiar, dreary cabin. Home. This. The heat, the prying, stinking blacks, the slow, yellow river, the poison snakes, the darkness with eyes. She stifled a sob, recalling Stacys Holding, the dream that had first tangled her fate with the Stacys'.

Gerald led her to the rude bed, with its wrinkled mosquito cloth, and tick filled with cattails. She saw again the great bed at Stacys Holding, down soft, its velvet canopy guarded by the Stacy arms.

She remembered Ajax, and writhed with the memory.

Gerald stooped, and kissed her, incredulous reverence leashing his passion.

I hate him, she thought, and then, *No! No—if I hated him I might yet love him, as I love—*

"Clarissa," Gerald said, "I have never told you all your coming means. Do you remember the old tale of Circe, the enchantress who turned men to swine? You are an enchantress, too, Clarissa—a blessed enchantress, who makes men of beasts. Because of you, I am man again. Your love is a sacrament, cleansing me of my sins. Take me in your arms, Clarissa, and tell me that you love me, and that so I am worthy of your love."

"No," she said, "No—I—" She checked the words on her tongue. She must never tell him that she was as other women, no better, no worse, and that he must accept her so, or all her life would be an irksome sham. Prudence warned her this humility, this reverence, were her best defense. Of them, he was even now erecting a barrier beyond which no suspicion could creep. In them lay her only safety. He knelt before her, and she bowed her cheek to his hair, passive, resigned, as she felt her nearness run through him.

But when at last he held her in his arms, cold terror vised her. Her teeth chattered with fear of discovery, and she stiffened, so that he whispered, "Clarissa—sweetheart—don't

be afraid. I'm only Gerald. I'm only your husband, whom you love."

Her husband. Gerald. Her husband—*whom she loved*.

Hysteria seized her. Their marriage was consummated with mockery and terror standing by, and the shadow of Ajax lying between them.

The night was full of eyes. Motionless on the pallet, in the heavy darkness, Clarissa felt them, stabbing her helplessness.

The bright printed linen Gerald had purchased in Jamestown had been dropped at door and window, but the fierce moonlight beat against it, silhouetting the old black woman, Naomi, crouched on heels and haunches, the other blacks, moving back and forth, their flat tread sucking the damp earth.

What are they doing? she thought. *I must know what they are doing.*

She eased herself from the bed, hardly breathing. Gerald turned over, grunting, flinging out an arm, half-consciously seeking her. When she heard his breathing steady again, she crept to the doorway and held aside the hanging, peering through the crack.

They were planting a small tree, near the entrance. A live oak. She remembered sharply the gushing "blood," and leaned against the jamb, shivering, before another memory disentangled itself from the maze of recent impressions. Naomi had told her the live oak, with its vital sap, and acorns that dropped throughout the year, was the tree of fertility, powerful to bless. She began to laugh silently, covering her face with her hands, reflecting how miraculously soon the blacks' magic would prove effective.

She returned to the bed. Gerald's arm reached out and pulled her against him. He had been awake all the time, awake, watching her. From this hour, always, always, he

would be watching her. Again, the sense of years pressed on her. She felt the exhaustion of a lifetime creep over her, and her head lolled against him. She was too weary to move, even when his arms tightened about her, and she knew his passion was not yet spent.

XI

FOR THE past two weeks, the men of the Commonwealth had been reaping and gathering into barns. It had been a good year, a blessedly good year. When they met on the appointed Day of Thanksgiving, to praise the Lord for His goodness to the children of men, they would do so from full hearts and full bellies, not as they had last year, with belts pulled tight, and lips stiffened against the trembling, unworthy fear engendered by half-filled bins and lean kine.

There were great stacks of maize heaped in the fields, and the pumpkins were round and fat as the sun itself. Every man in the Colony was put to work, noble and gentleman and indented servant, patriarch and boy not yet in his teens.

Ajax woke while it was dark, and smeared pumpkin butter on a great crust of bread, and washed it down his gullet with a pint of beer, and was in the field by sunup, hailing his shadowy companions with a shout of joy, cutting down tall stalks with the night frost still on them. A good life, a man's life. At night, they seemed to sleep as soundly as the dead of last year's famine.

Into such toil-won rest small sounds did not enter. Ajax did not hear the first midnight whoop in the distance. He did not even hear the alarm, flinging men to their muskets and women to their knees. It was Gerry's cry that woke him, Gerry's hand, reaching from the trundle, to catch his arm, in uncomprehended panic.

But he heard it then, well enough: the shuddering whoop of the Pequots, thrilling the wind.

Before he was on his feet, Ajax's hand had caught up the morion and corselet from the bench beside him. He fastened the bandoleer automatically, and clutched the matchlock musket from the corner as he ran into the street.

He was not fully awake yet, but he discovered the street was filled with men running as he was. Captain Stoughton passed him, his armor chinking, as he fastened the straps. As they reached the market, Captain Keayne ran from his door, and the three arrived at the square together, to find it already filled with gentlemen of the Military Company of the Massachusetts, the red plumes of their morions banner-ing the wind.

The whoop sounded again, nearer. A column of flame burst upward, as the roof-tree fell in a house built too far from the settlement.

Simon Bradstreet muttered, "It's come at last," and Ajax knew he meant the Pequot vengeance, simmering like a witchbrew, since their destruction at the hands of John Mason.

"They're coming from the Northwest," someone cried, and Ajax ran forward, adjusting his slow-match as he ran, marveling at the sudden silence. But for the flames leaping from rick to rick, the night was like all others. It made a man careless, made him relax.

"God!" he cried, and swung his musket. The grain, stirring as though a reptile moved through it, was still. Sweat jumped from his pores. He stooped, saw the scalping knife still clutched in quiet fingers. He had had no time to fire. "God," he muttered again, and drew the rough sleeve of his buff-coat shakily across his face.

The field through which the Pequot had passed leaped into flame. A figure was silhouetted against it. It stumbled, rose, stumbled on. By the flames, he saw it was white, naked. A shuddering scream reached him. A woman. As he began to run toward her, the fire behind died, and he saw she was a living pyre. Her flesh had been stuck as full of pine splinters as a porcupine, and she had been forced into the burning field to run for her life through it. As Ajax reached her, she fell forward. Her weight drove the splinters deep. But it was terror, more merciful than torture, that brought

swift release. When he touched her, she was dead.

As he straightened, something thudded against his buff-coat. The heavy leather deflected it, but an instant later, another arrow pierced his doublet, nicking his thigh. He fired blindly, and knew by the answering shriek he had been lucky. After a moment, he turned, began to run, crouching low in the ripe grain.

Something stumbled against him. In the light of a suddenly fired rick, he saw it was a man. He had been scalped, and the blood flowing over his sagging features made him unrecognizable. Ajax lifted him, and staggered back. From his delirious babble, he learned they two were all that had been left of a household of twelve souls. They had run out as the Indians approached. The rest had been prisoned in the house, and burned with it.

All around them, the stacks of maize were afire. The whoop of the triumphant Pequots, the scream of cattle in a blazing barn, the rattle of musketry and cries of the wounded made the night a vast Purgatory. No man could live through it, unflinching or unchanged.

Ajax turned at the first open door he saw. It was the Winthrops', and had become a sort of gathering place of the wounded. The savages had not yet penetrated so far, but by the door stood two maidservants, ready to slam it and fling across the heavy bar at the first sign of their approach. Most of the houses were already barricaded, their women and children waiting with muskets poised at the peepholes, but here there was still shelter for those in need of it.

The smell of blood and powder and salt meat sizzling at the fire filled the big hall. Before the fireplace, Margaret Winthrop stood, tight-lipped and stern-eyed, taking a piece of meat from the spit. Opposite, knelt Anne Bradstreet, supporting a man with a great gash in his thigh. She was white with effort, but her eyes, too, were level, her mouth grim. She stooped quickly as Margaret turned from the fire, cleans-

ing the meat of ash, and as the other bent, spread the wound wide, wiping it quickly with clean linen, and holding it gaping, until the hot meat had been inserted. The injured man screamed and writhed in agony, but neither woman faltered. They pressed the wound tight, and bound it with the strip of bloody linen.

When it was done, Anne Bradstreet leaned against the wall a moment, smothering her coughing. But for that, she gave no sign of weakness.

Margaret turned quickly, and saw Ajax with the scalped man. Her eyes widened, and she caught her breath, and when she spoke her gentle voice seemed stern.

"Leave him with us, Master Stacy, and return to your post," she said, but even as he turned to obey her, cried out, "Master Stacy! You—you are yourself wounded!"

"It's nothing—just an arrow-nick—"

Instantly, she ran forward, shoving up his doublet. "Quick," she said, "Quick, Jonathan! It is already blue and bloated!"

A teen-age boy hurried forward, grinning in anticipation. "Steady, now, Master Stacy—ah, that's a fine one!"

Ajax cried out, then set his teeth as the sharp hunting knife crisscrossed his wound, and two boys, obviously delighted with their share in the night's excitement, began pushing and pressing, talking in urgent, expert whispers as the blood flowed, carrying off the poison.

After a while, Anne came over. She bore a basin of hot water, and a poultice. "That will suffice, Jonathan," she said faintly, and wiped the wound, and bound the poultice in place. "Very well, Master Stacy."

Ajax limped to the door. He wanted to cry out for forgiveness, to tell these women of his new understanding, of admiration no beauty could have quickened in him. He mumbled, "I am very grateful. You have been admirable—admirable—" He realized suddenly, no one was listening. No

one had time for pretty speeches. In this place, where the stark insistence on survival was an hourly companion, men and women would do great things, without thought of compliments or gratitude. Heaven itself would be scaled, not by golden ladders, but the strait relentless path of duty nobly done.

XII

IN THE early weeks of their marriage, Gerald spoke often of the great house he would build at Feathergrant, laughing a little, apologetically, as he compared its "greatness" with Stacys Holding. Yet under his mockery, Clarissa sensed pride, as she watched him planning and measuring and drafting, in the long twilights. Gradually, she realized the small, rough dwelling would mean more to Gerald than all the castles in England.

The knowledge stirred her contempt for him, anew, and added to her discontent and restlessness. Was it possible that Gerald Stacy would rest satisfied with a hut in the wilderness, with the companionship of rare visitors whose interests had narrowed like his own to a patch of black earth, and their immediate families, with a life bounded by daytime toil and nights of heavy slumber? The black slaves had as much as that. She watched Gerald, her lip curling, and fanned her smoldering determination with a fierceness sprung from despair.

Some day, we shall return. When the fields have yielded their increase, when conditions in England change, we shall return.

Return. Return to a goggling London, to an amazed and confounded Ajax. Return in her ripe maturity, more beautiful than ever, with the glamour of distant adventures giving her new importance. Return, to be mistress of Stacys Holding after all, her dreams postponed, but not defeated.

To that conscious end she bent the effort of every hour. To that end she forced the blacks to merciless labor, and herself struggled through the heat of midsummer and the fatigue of her pregnancy, without rest. To that end she

molded Gerald to her will, with the gentleness of her voice and smile to cloak her impatient, tireless planning.

Gerald, quick to give orders, and as quick to forget them, did not realize that more than wifely devotion prompted those long walks through the hot fields. He felt her hand on his arm, and stood the straighter for her gentle dependence on him, never guessing how much the innocent eyes saw, under their modestly lowered lids, never dreaming that new, constructive ideas, relayed by him to the slaves, had not originated in his own strong masculine mind.

But if her husband was deceived, the blacks were not. They were as aware as she that the new systematic relentless routine had originated in the hard brain beneath the soft curls, and had not merely evolved through usage, as Gerald believed. She never raised her voice as she had in London to her hapless maids. She never forgot, morning to night, night to morning, that Gerald listened and watched. *Never free. Never again free.* Whatever happened, she must rule Gerald first, for Gerald was her weapon, her tool. She herself had nothing but her will, her power over Gerald. Gerald owned the acres that stretched beyond her knowledge, the means of plenty. To achieve that plenty, to be free at last, she must own Gerald.

That she did own him, even as he owned them, was reflected in the action of the slaves. When she spoke, they listened, when she ordered, they ran to obey her. Yet they were as ignorant as Gerald of the sleepless hours when she lay planning, moving their tasks and destinies like chessmen on a board.

All her life, she had matched her wits against fate. It was not a pastime, it was a habit evolved from necessity. For a little, cuddling the ambergris to her breast, she had thought she was liberated. Always, she had expected to put anxiety from her, with marriage. Instead, she now found it omnipresent, in the eyes of Rawlins, or those of the other planters who occasionally came to Feathergrant. Even when she went

to Shirley Hundred or to Jamestown, there was no sense of a civilization far removed from primitive needs. The town dwellers went through the motions of London society, they drank wines imported from across the world, they were clad in scarlet cloth and gold thread, some of them even ate with forks. But there was in their eyes the same urgency she had discovered was forever present in the eyes of Rawlins, and the other planters. Even when they did not speak of tobacco, their eyes held the look of men who are dependent upon rain, and wind, and sun.

For the most part, they did talk of tobacco, and little else. In Virginia, Laud himself was shrunk to lesser stature than a three-foot plant with small yellow blossoms. If they spoke of Parliament, it was not to consider the grant to Charles for war on the Covenanters, but rather, laws touching their crop, or the effect of the wars on England's smokers. Through their words and their eyes, Clarissa grew to realize that tobacco meant life, no more, no less.

Gerald's crop matured at last. It was meager and late, due to its inexperienced care, but they calculated there would be enough to pay for the winter's living, for necessities, and even small luxuries from England. At the top of his list Gerald had written *nails*—the most precious of all items in housebuilding.

Clarissa said, "I thought they'd found ore at Falling Creek. I can't see why they don't use it for nails, instead of shipping it to England, and letting settlers who want to move burn down their houses to get the nails from them to build another house."

Gerald smiled. "Labor, my Clarissa, labor. The ore can be worked in England, but here every pair of hands is needed. Besides, they don't 'let' them."

"But they do it. People do what they must. And a house once built saves the labor of building," she fretted, looking so pretty he laughed as at a precocious child.

"You couldn't understand, my poppet," he said, and kissed

away the irony at her mouth corner. "And after all—as long as we can buy nails—why trouble?"

As long as we can buy this. As long as we can buy that. Gerald had not lost the habit of thinking that years of luxurious living had begotten in him. But to Clarissa, who had never been wealthy, it did not seem that they "bought" anything. The money Gerald had brought with him was exhausted. Repeated efforts to get more from England had so far failed. Like their neighbors, they bartered what they had for what they needed, and when their immediate resources were exhausted, gave notes on the crop.

Clarissa said to Rawlins, "But what if there is no crop?" and he looked up and away quickly, but not before she had read in his eyes a denial of the comfort in his words.

"Summer and winter fail not," he said slowly. "Of course, some years it's better than others."

"This year, we know it will not be good. At any rate, ours will not be."

Rawlins said quickly, "It will suffice. And next year—"

"If it doesn't 'suffice,'" Clarissa interrupted. "What then?"

Rawlins lifted a shoulder. His eyes were on the river, where a group of Indians were mooring a barge. "Sometimes the natives feed us," he said. "Have you ever seen them fish?" He slipped an arm under her elbow, started down.

Clarissa went with him, watched dutifully while a fire was kindled in the boat, and a woman and child squatted to toss on fagots. At either end, a man stood with a spear, and two other children knelt at the gunwales, fishing with sharpened bone hooks, dangling from fine hair lines. As the sun set, the fish rose to the firelight, and the men speared them and dragged them aboard. Rawlins beckoned, and they brought half a dozen ashore, two so large they dragged them through the water by a noose, slipped over their tails.

Eating them, washed down with fine wines, Rawlins and Gerald smacked their lips, content, but Clarissa was thoughtful. The whites starved—and the Indians "sometimes" fed

them. Among the savages, famine was unknown. Yet they grew and stored only enough for a year. She thought, *We must do that. We must learn what we need, and grow it, and store it. We have no resource but ourselves.* That night, she added a storehouse and curing pit to Gerald's plans for the great house, and a powder tub to the kitchen list.

They were in the midst of the harvest when the storm struck. Clarissa, standing at the cabin door, saw Hannibal and Elias straighten, sniffing the air like stallions scenting conflict. Within the moment, she heard the first far roll of thunder, saw the trees swoop, silver with turned leaves.

Naomi, on the ground at her feet, stretched up screeching, covering her head with ancient, corded arms. In unconscious mimicry, Clarissa pulled her cloak around her, herself instinct-driven to shelter.

At that moment, Gerald passed her. The bull whip Rawlins had given him was clenched in his hand, and as he ran he shouted to the slaves, whipping them up from their knees, herding them before him as he went. His eyes glittered in his hard face; Clarissa heard the harshness of his breathing, stressing the moment's need. The nearing thunder obliterated his voice, breaking with urgency and despair. A drop of rain touched Clarissa's hand, clutching her blowing cloak, as she stood inert in the doorway. On the hill, a great tree fell, split by a blade of lightning.

The blacks screamed and scattered, howling their fear. Gerald cried to them to return, but the thunder drowned his cry. Clarissa saw him standing in the field where the wind bent the tobacco to the earth.

The cloak dropped from her head, swept up and out like wings with her running. The blacks saw it, saw her hair like pale flames rising about her head, saw the wind lift her small body so that she seemed to fly. She sped past Gerald catching the whip from his hand, striking to right and left with all her force, thrilling with a sense of power as she saw them fall back before her as before an avenging spirit,

screaming for mercy, rushing along the rows splitting stalks, and cutting plants with frenzied haste, driven between their awe of her and of the advancing storm.

Dimly she knew that Gerald was crying to her to stop, dimly she saw the flash of lightning on his wheel-lock pistol, as he drew it from his belt. She knew he would not need to use it, even as she knew he would not humiliate her by forcing her obedience before the blacks.

She even whipped Naomi out among them, and her laugh rang out in answer to the thunder, as she caught up a stick and knife, herself, and urging Gerald to make haste, hurried triumphantly along the rows, spearing and slashing as she had seen the others do, forcing her frail body beyond its utmost strength.

I will not starve, nor beg from savages. I will not waste my whole life in a wilderness.

The field was two thirds cleared when the hail came, gashing their flesh and clawing the uncut crop to shreds. Then at last she yielded, falling back in Gerald's arms, fainting.

He carried her back to the cabin, and cried to Naomi to bring her a posset. The old woman obeyed with a speed and eagerness she had not shown before, and Gerald hastened back to the sheds, where the blacks were spreading the plants apart on the sticks, so that the rain might run from them, before they mildewed. In spite of the haste of the harvesting, few were bruised enough to hurt their value. With what had been gathered before, there should be enough to provide starvation sustenance for another year.

The storm had passed when he returned to the cabin. He stared at the stars heavily, wondering if the clear weather would hold long enough to cure the leaves without house-burn. Rawlins had told him there was seldom a year when it was altogether avoided. They had escaped lightning-injury, but loss from rotting, with the field loss, would mean penury.

He looked a long time at Clarissa, pale and slender and helpless, asleep in the candlelight. He could not free his

bewildered mind of that other Clarissa, her teeth bared with fury and triumph, the bull whip singing in her hand. He bit his lip, frowning, never guessing how closely she watched between her slitted lids.

She was too clever, too versed in men, not to know what caused his perplexity. *No matter*, she thought. *No matter what he thinks of me. The crop is saved. Because of me we shall not starve. Because of me, we shall not grovel to naked savages. A little Queen. A little Queen.*

For the rest, she would rule him as she willed. She would rule him by her white skin, her soft breasts, her gentle yielding, when yielding served her purpose. She would lull his brain by the drug of her body.

She opened her eyes, and smiled, and wriggled playfully, like an awakening cat. She stretched out her hand, and took his, and cuddled it against her throat.

"You are so wonderful, Gerald," she murmured. "I would never have guessed the danger in that storm. But you—why, the moment the sky turned dark—" she held his hand against her lips, mauling it gently with her teeth.

His breath tore through him, but he did not yield himself to her. "Clarissa," he said, and his voice was harsh, "you must go back."

She was so startled, she sat up; her loose night trail fell from her shoulder, and he turned away quickly. "Back? Back where?"

"To England. To Stacys Holding." She was too startled to answer, but for a caught breath. It sounded like a little moan, and was so easily misinterpreted that he fell on his knees beside her, pleading. "Oh, Clarissa—my sweet love—Believe me, it is the only way. You don't understand. Even if we save all that is gathered, we shall be poor—bitterly poor. But at Stacys Holding you would be safe. Ajax would be so happy to have you—" he stopped, his face suddenly bitter. "If he is there. I can never think of Ajax away from Stacys Holding." He brushed a troubled hand across his

forehead, as if to clear it of muddled thoughts. "But whether Ajax is there or not, Dolly Wimple will be. She'd be so thankful for you, Clarissa. She'd despaired of ever having a 'fitting lady' for Stacys Holding."

Clarissa was not listening. Stacys Holding. Stacys Holding, and herself its "fitting lady." Joy, so overwhelming she trembled with it, gripped her. The end of the wilderness, the end of anxiety and fear and privation. A little sob of incredulous happiness escaped her.

Gerald said, "My darling, my dearest Clarissa— Don't! Don't break your heart for me. After all, I have had you. No other man has ever had such happiness as having you, Clarissa. And some time—some time—" his voice broke, and he forced his words painfully, "some time, I shall have you again, if I am ever man enough to keep you."

She felt the joy in her turn to bitterness at his words. "Man enough." He never would be man enough, without her, because in his own eyes he never would be man at all. She remembered what he had said to her on their wedding night—*turning beast to man*. She remembered the black girl, lying on his bed, her sharp breasts pricking the golden feather. She remembered the heaps of rotting pigeons, the disorderly cabin, the shiftless blacks. She thought, *If I go, he will slip back into that, he will never be anything. And I am married to him. All my life, I shall be tied to a worthless, improvident hulk, shaped like a man*. And then, stabbing, another thought: *I would be dependent on Ajax. The roof over my head, the food in my mouth, the life in my body—all from him, from Ajax*.

Ajax. Ajax, who had cheated her, who had delighted to force her to parade her passion for him, knowing in his heart he would leave her. She thought, *He would believe I had returned, because of that, because I could not conquer my passion*. The blood rushed through her, and swept back, leaving her cold. In her heart, she knew that Ajax would not take Gerald's wife entrusted to his care. Day after day,

she would have to see him, riding, laughing, lolling in the great chair before the fireplace. Night after night, she would have to lie alone, gnawing at her knuckles to force back the cry of hunger, of frustration. And he, he would watch her, knowing it. He would watch her as he had that night at Stacys Holding, his eyes mocking, desirous, taunting her. "So you came here, because you feared to be alone at night, and believed I loved you. . . . Near, very near. . . ." Near—as he had been near ever since. In her heart. In her mind. In the child she carried.

She said, "I am not going."

"Clarissa," Gerald cried, "You don't understand. It will be horrible. It will change you. I can't bear to have you changed. Even today—"

He is afraid, she thought, afraid of what I shall do. I must lull his fear. I must make him believe there was a reason beyond my intention to live. It is not nice, it is not gentle, for a lady to insist on living. They should be content to disappear, without fuss or embarrassment—as Charlotte did.

She sank her head against Gerald, so that he might not see her distended nostrils, her curling lip. "Gerald," she said, "You don't understand—about today. You will never know how you looked, standing there with those insolent savages—Gerald, I couldn't bear it. No wife could have borne it. Even if—even if there weren't another reason. Even if we didn't *have* to save the crop, this year, because—Oh, Gerald, didn't you know? Didn't you guess? Even when I fainted, with the weariness, and pain, and anxiety—didn't you know—then?"

XIII

EARLY IN November, Ajax reached his decision. Already, the sea wind cut the night with a keen bright blade, and in the morning, frost lay soft and white on reddening cranberry and undaunted pine.

His purpose would not be easy to accomplish, even now. To wait would be fatal. He rose almost impatiently from the stool, where he had hunched, staring in Gerry's sleeping face. If he had had only himself to consider, he would have left within a week of the Pequot raid, as soon as that night's loss was known to herald another winter of privation and plague. Surely, he, who had not shared the labor of the first frosty breaking of the soil and early planting, had no right to share the meager grain of hunger.

In England, he and Gerald had given with careless good nature of their abundance to those in need, but it remained for a severe soil, for a just and rigorous climate, to awaken in him the mercy born of suffering.

Those from without would not discover that mercy. They would see the hard, unsmiling faces, and forget the work-worn hands, offering the shared grits of penury. They would prate with upturned eyes of the poor wretch in the bilboes, and ignore the kindly law condemning him: that no man might cruelly ill-use any dumb brute. Here, where death elbowed life with every movement, the destinies of all creatures were so finely sifted together no man might separate them. If one prospered, all did. If one died, all suffered.

He pulled on the red knitted cap lately sent from Monmouth, reflecting that though it lacked the beauty of the plumed beaver once so jaunty on his curls at home, it had a sturdier worth. It kept his ears warm. It was rather like the local ladies: though lacking somewhat in frivolous entice-

ments, it was endeared to man by sound and comforting virtue. Smiling, he left for the Cottons'.

He found them around the great fireplace in the hall. Sarah made a gesture of welcome, but no one moved. John Cotton was reading from the Book, and it was not meet to interrupt the Word of God.

Ajax muted his stomping, and joined the others on a narrow backless bench, discouraging to drowsing. Cotton finished reading and began to pray. He prayed until the fire dimmed precariously, and then released the Lord's attention a trifle abruptly, and motioned his son to put on another log.

The room sprang into life. The small Cottons pounced on a basket of kittens, and the mother cat stretched, recurled herself, tucked her nose beneath her tail and purred with thunderous contentment. Sarah turned the pone, for much piety in danger of burning, and pulled her flax wheel nearer the fire. The older girls returned to the unfinished dipping of rushes in the redolent wax of native bayberries. The Reverend Cotton himself grasped Ajax's hand as heartily as though he had just arrived, and hastened to hang his coat on a chair back, lining to the fire, that it might be warm for his leaving.

Ajax said without preamble, "I have determined to continue my journey."

The yarn snarled in Sarah's fingers. "Not before winter!" she exclaimed.

Cotton said, "Have you determined your destination? You should be warned that here winter is as the Assyrian: it descends like a wolf on the fold."

"I hope to reach Aquidneck before it sets in."

Ajax caught the Cottons' quick exchanged glance. Aquidneck: Isle of Errors.

"It will be a bleak journey," Cotton warned. He knew it was useless. He, too, had felt that urgency in his youth. Whatever its cause, he recognized it. Then, he had preferred the wilderness to a silenced tongue, a muted conscience. But

since, he had discovered how many small streams may run into one great river. If it were greater freedom Ajax wanted—he sighed, remembering. Soon Ajax, too, would understand how few feet of soil suffice the freest man, at the end. Yet because he saw in Ajax the material needed in the colony, he urged, “We have much which no other settlement in history has had, Master Stacy. Even in the new world, we are unique. Virginia and Guiana were opened by adventurers or those seeking self-betterment, but we of the Bay yielded wealth and position and all the refinements of the flesh for the nebulous fruits of the spirit. It cannot fail to bring reward to our children, for, as it was said in the hour of our departure, ‘the eyes of all are upon us. We choose life that our seed may live by obeying God’s voice, and He is our life and our prosperity.’”

Ajax looked up quickly. Cotton’s unwillingness to have him go, his suggestion that Gerry’s welfare should stay him, had touched him more deeply than he liked to admit. He decided he must give the true reason for his going, if these who had received him so generously were not to think him ungrateful; but, he discovered, it was not an easy confession to make. He said stiffly:

“The Stacys cannot live on the work of other men, while their benefactors hunger.”

Sarah cried, “But surely it is better to live thus than not to live at all.”

“Have you spoken to the Governor?” Cotton asked.

“I am about to go there now.”

Sarah thrust back her wheel. “Master Stacy— You mustn’t do this! I cannot bear to think of that blessed child— John Cotton, tell him we would all aid. The Lord will provide—”

“How?” Ajax demanded doggedly. “Can you put seed in frozen ground, and harvest it under the snow?” He forced a laugh, to lighten the bitterness of his words.

Cotton turned to the fire to hide his working face. “Surely the hand of the Lord has been heavy upon us,” he said at

last, "yet shall we come forth with singing and great gladness." He went to the door with Ajax, and laid his hand for a moment on his strong shoulder. "Master Stacy, when the boy is a trifle older, if you do not yourself return, send him to me, and I will prepare him for Master Harvard's excellent institution." He looked away, shamefacedly. "Mistress Cotton has so great a fondness for the lad, it would comfort her were I to take her your promise."

"I promise," said Ajax, and stepped into the cold night feeling warm.

When he arrived at the Winthrops', the Governor was not at home, but Margaret called a servant to stir the fire, and motioned him to a deep, high-backed chair brought out from England.

"I am taking Gerry to Aquidneck," he told her, as he seated himself. "I came to tell the Governor of my decision, and to ask his advice."

Margaret pressed her small hands together. "You do not mean—*now*?" He nodded, and she cried, "But, Master Stacy! You cannot know of the dangers. This land is not like England. It is wild and impulsive, like a youth with a giant's strength and less than a man's wits. When it snows, it does it for days together, so that a wayfarer may be lost from Innocents' to Shrovetide, and none the wiser till the thaw sets in. And whether it snows or not, the wolves are like the poor: always with us!"

Ajax smiled. "But however regretfully, I shall resemble neither the poor nor the wolves, in that. I cannot be with you, always."

She looked at him quickly, from beneath lowered lids. "You have some reason, doubtless, to choose Aquidneck?"

Suddenly, he remembered what Vane had told him, of the friendship between Anne Hutchinson and Margaret Winthrop. He said impulsively, "I have a message for someone there," and from her quick flush, he knew she had guessed. "For Mistress Anne Hutchinson," he added slowly.

"Please!" Margaret exclaimed. Her color had faded, so that she was quite pale, and her lips trembled as she smiled. "We do not speak of her here. You know she was excommunicated, and we were admonished she must be as the dead and damned to us forever."

Ajax heard her breath catch quiveringly, and said boldly, "But she is not dead, and I greatly doubt that she is damned."

Margaret shook her head. "They went into all of it quite thoroughly. It was a very long trial." Something of the ordeal darkened her fine eyes. It was if she relived the suffering, the tearing conflict of loyalties, the terrible days when a courageous woman, her closest friend, had stood before the Council, where her husband was chief magistrate. "A very long trial," she repeated. "They believed her guilty, so she was driven forth from among us."

Ajax, watching her gravely, felt the word "believed," jutting from her sentence. Not "found." "Believed." He said, "I have a message for her from my friend and hers, Harry Vane."

Margaret's chin rose. Ajax recalled the tale that had rocked London with mirth, of how to vent a grudge against John Winthrop Harry Vane had carried off the young Lord Ley to a cheap tavern, and there so befuddled him with liquor that he had completely forgotten the guests assembled and the meats roasting in his honor at the Winthrop hearth. It seemed incredible now that Vane had used such youthful tricks to plague Anne Hutchinson's enemies. It seemed incredible that any of the group that once filled Stacys Holding with their ribaldries had ever been young. He said, "Sir Harry is a most sober gentleman, now."

Margaret said, "Sir Harry was a very loyal friend of—hers."

"He has been loyal to all of you."

"To—us?" Margaret's eyes flashed to his.

"He has never ceased to plead the Puritan cause. Nor is

the end yet. But you must have known—you must have heard of the seizure of Raby.”

“I heard many things,” Margaret admitted. She pressed her lips together, as if she would prison the syllables on her tongue. But suddenly, they broke from her. “Will they never cease persecuting the Saints? Are the flames of Smithfield to be rekindled, while the King stands idly by? Truly they cry from the Altar as of old, How long, oh, Lord, how long?”

Ajax leaned forward. His voice was muted as though he were still in London, as though the eyes of the Calf still peered through keyholes. “It will not be long, now. The ancient Force is stirring again, and no man can put it down. Can Little Will suppress the sap in the trees, or Black Tom keep April grass from showing?”

“But if this is so,” Margaret whispered, “what will be the end?”

“The end,” cried Ajax, “will be the way of the Lord. It will be the way of Hezekiah, pleading at the Altar, while the Hand of the Lord was laid upon the hosts of the mighty. It will be the way of Drake, praying on a cockleshell, while the sea stirred under the Armada, and the wind shouted with the Voice of the Lord God. There will be a leader raised up unto us in the hour of our need, and we shall follow him with courage and rejoicing!”

He had jumped up, and stood with his head thrown back and his eyes closed, and a light in his face that caught Margaret's breath from her.

“You sound like—her,” she whispered. “Oh, if you do make the journey, if you do see her—” she stopped, and looked away, her eyes filled with tears.

“I will tell her,” Ajax promised, and went into the night quickly.

XIV

IT WAS a warm day for late November, with the blue and gold clarity peculiar to New England fall. Starting out in the early morning, with Gerry shouting excited farewells from the back of the pack-ox Winthrop had insisted on his taking, Ajax had wondered why he had hesitated, why he had lain awake weighing through somber midnights the warnings of his neighbors, why, in the first place, they had seen fit to warn him. Certainly, they were neither cowards nor alarmists. Their whole lives were passed in the midst of hazards such as would have made tradition back in England. They ate and drank and slept and went through all the casual routine of daily living against a background of famine and plague and Indians and wild beasts, and managed to thrust these into the casual place the average man at home accorded death. Panic and complaint and mourning they flung behind them like the devil himself, and bolted their stout hearts against whimpering and regret. Yet one after another, they had taken him aside, and warned him.

When they left Boston, half the town went with them to the trail. Anne Bradstreet covered her agitation with many admonitions, but Sarah Cotton was weeping openly.

"Even if you do not return, yourself, Master Stacy, you will send the lad back? My husband tells me he has great promise—"

"I pwomise!" Gerry piped, "I pwomise!— Why don't we go, Uncl' Ajax?"

So they had gone, amid laughter and tears and advice, Ajax striding by the side of the ox, whistling, now that such frivolity could not be censured. What he was whistling, he did not realize until the words broke from him at last, ring-

ing through the mighty woods as gaily as ever they had in Buckinghamshire:

"I have loved
Three whole days together—"

He stopped, mid-verse. "Three whole days—" Not even one day. Not even one whole night. What would it be like to hold Clarissa, for "three whole days"?

"Go on, Uncl' Ajax," Gerry urged. "Nat's a nice song. Gewwy likes it."

Ajax flushed fierily, as if the child had read his thought, and switched hastily.

"The psalms shall be our music,
Our time spent in expounding—"

"No," interrupted Gerry firmly. "Don't want. Want other song."

"You mustn't want that song," Ajax said, thinking of Anne Bradstreet. His voice was almost testy, but his lips twitched. Somewhere in his mind an unregenerate voice mocked, *The Stacy men!* He put it from him firmly. "This song is a great song, and will always mean something great. But the one you want is light, and frivolous, and—"

"What's fwivlus, Uncl' Ajax?"

"Frivolous is—is what that song is. It's—"

"Like 'm fwivlus," Gerry decided. "Like 'm fwivlus. Umm. Fwee whole days—"

"Good God," cried Ajax, "That is— You mustn't. And don't ask why. You mustn't. That's all there is to it."

They went on in silence.

After awhile, Gerry said, "Why, Uncl' Ajax?"

His tone was so plaintive, Ajax was startled. After a brief presumption that the Suckling songs would be no more popular in the Isle of Errors than in the Bay, Ajax had dismissed the whole matter from his mind. Now, he asked unguardedly:

"Why what?"

Gerry did not answer, and he glanced up at him. The roguish little face dimpled, scarlet with repression and laughter. He bounced on the ox, and chanted lustily, "'Fwee whole days'— Why mustn't I sing it, Uncl' Ajax? Huh? Why mustn't Gewwy sing, Fwee whole days, huh?"

"Because you mustn't," Ajax said, "and you mustn't say 'Huh.' What do you think you are? An Indian? Here, get down off that ox, and use your legs for a while."

He lifted the boy down, and they trudged in silence for half an hour. Then Gerry said:

"Uncl' Ajax, when you sang, Fwee whole days—"

"Carefull!"

"Huh?"

"Gerry, do you remember Solomon?"

Gerry looked up, eyes wide. He nodded, awed to silence. Solomon was the mean old King who had talked about rods and children.

"Well, see you don't forget him."

"No. But when you sang— I mean—is now what you were thinking of, huh, Uncl' Ajax, I mean, huh?"

Ajax decided to yield the point. After all, Anne Bradstreet could not hear, and Gerry obviously had an idea beyond his vocabulary. He for one cared more for the idea than the words.

"Now? What about now?"

"Will 't take us fwee whole days t' get t' 'Quidneck? Hu—"

"Probably," said Ajax hastily, "it will take us considerably more. But you don't mind, do you?"

"No. Want t' eat."

So they stopped, and ate their first meal in the woods, Ajax inwardly rejoicing that the child was not homesick for his Boston friends.

And yet, why should he be? In all his brief life, he had had no permanent companionship. Even his mother was come-and-go.

He wondered what had happened to Matilda, and the picture of her standing at the door at Stacys Holding, looking back toward her boy who did not even notice her, caught at his heart pitifully. He opened his lips to speak of it, to ask Gerry if he remembered his mother, and then thought better of it. There was no use opening up old wounds, if wound there were. He must protect the child from hurt while he could. There would be sorrow enough when he came to manhood.

He rose, packed the remaining food, and started on.

That night, they made a fire of wind-broken branches. He sat beside it, musket across his knees, and thought of Clarissa and Stacys Holding and Laud. Here, with life and death nudging every passing hour, it seemed a strange thing that men should use their cunning and their courage to destroy each other. The forest stillness, the virgin trees, the quiet serenity of stars, made humanity a small, contentious thing. He wondered why God had so greatly troubled with it, and leaning closer tucked the covering more tenderly about the sleeping child, and knew the answer.

That day, they went more slowly for his night of waking, and when dusk fell were grateful for a bed of skins in a trapper's cabin.

When he started them on their trail, at dawn, the woodsman sniffed the wind like an animal, and shook his head.

"Nor'east," he said. "Better watch sharp, and not push too far. In your place I'd stop at the next cabin. It's this side the river, so it's not a full day's going, but once you're past it there's nothing before Pocasset. But that's journey's end. You'll find Thomas Gorton there, and he'll take you over."

Ajax remembered that, when dusk fell, sudden and sharp and cold. "Not a full day's going." They had been traveling since dawn, pausing no longer than on other days. Yet they had seen no sign of human life since they had left the trapper. He realized suddenly that it had been too long since the last blaze. He had been warned that as he drew near

the Bay, he would find the Narragansett trails more difficult to follow, for the woods were cleared, and trail and open forest had little to distinguish them.

"We're going to stop here," he said abruptly.

"Why?" Gerry's tone was fretful. "Want go on, Uncl' Ajax. Gewwy's cold!"

Ajax looked at him quickly. He had not realized how cold it had grown, but the boy's round little nose and chin were nipped red by frost, and he was shivering.

"Good God—why didn't you speak up?"

Anxiety sharpened his voice, and the child began to whimper. As he wound him in blankets, and lifted him to the ox, he coughed plaintively. The cough struck through Ajax like the echo of all the warnings he had heard.

"You stay there and answer when I yell," he said, and started back.

But it was already too dark to see far ahead. Hunting for the lost blaze was hopeless. At the end of half an hour, he faced the fact as calmly as he could. They were lost, and to go further would be madness. Yet to stay here, without shelter or knowledge of their whereabouts, seemed as mad. In the brief gaps of the branches, he could see the sky. It lowered over them, heavy with snow.

He tried to raise his courage with the thought, *That is why it's dark. It isn't really late.* But he knew the thought sprang from hope and not reality. When they came at last to an overhanging boulder, he lifted Gerry from the ox, and made a bed of skins in the meager shelter, and wove a rough screen of interlacing pine boughs. Shielded by it, the ox puffed and blew protestingly. Ajax made a fire and yielded to the bleak knowledge that pressed on him. It was growing steadily colder, and the boy was sick. His face was hot, and he did not awaken when Ajax lifted him down. Watching beside him in the firelight, Ajax thought his breathing had changed, become difficult. The spear of thought pierced

him, *If he dies, I shall have killed him. But for my pride, we would have stayed in Boston.*

It was useless to fight it with the reasons for his going. The boy's choked breathing answered, refuted them all.

Before dawn, the luminous pallor of falling snow spread through the darkness. The rising sun glittered with a merciless ferocity from tree and bush and ground. In its mocking light, Ajax saw the cabin he had sought. It was less than five hundred yards from where they had stopped. He raised the sick child to the ox, and they went toward it, painfully.

XV

AJAX TRIED to tell himself that Gerry's ailment was no more than natural fatigue, that he had never really overcome the handicap of his ill-nourished babyhood, the stormy voyage. But within himself, he knew the truth, before he saw it in the startled eyes of the woman who opened to them the door of the first cottage on the outskirts of Providence.

"It's the death four of my babies met last winter," she said. "God forgive me, but I cannot open my door to it. I have but one bairn left."

"We have come from Boston," Ajax said. "It has taken us nine days, with the snow, and losing the trail."

The woman's breath caught in a sob. "God help me! God help me, I cannot—" She stood wringing her hands, as he turned helplessly away. "Wait!" she cried. "There's the curing shed. It's tight enough, and has a fireplace."

She pulled her apron over her head, and ran before him. When she opened the door, the musty smell, the peculiar dank cold of closed buildings, flowed out. He set his lips and followed her into it. In one corner, a pile of wood rose roof high. A broken bench, a joint stool filled most of the remaining space. Against the wall, a trestle table, taken down for room, leaned uncertainly.

"Use what you will of the wood," she said. "And set up the table. I'll be out with coverings and something hot, directly."

He began to work in the dusky cabin, putting from him the cruelty of its dampness, and ill cheer. *The death my four babies met.* Her words knelled in his mind. *But she has one left. Thank God, she has one yet alive. He may be stricken unto death, and yet live.*

He knew now that Gerry was stricken to death. They had stayed three days in the river-edge cabin, until the cold had abated, and when they started out again, he had been so sure the child could undertake what remained of the journey. And from there, they had moved very slowly, staying for long rests over each remaining night in one of the scattered settlers' cottages that were closer together as they drew near Providence. But even before the woman's startled cry, Ajax had realized the toll of these past hours.

A dozen times, they had stopped, while he pulled the nested furs closer around the suffering child. A dozen times, he had marked the anguished breathing, the burning, swollen face. And each time, and a hundred times between, he had prayed, "God, bring us safe to Providence. Only let me know that we are there, that this terrible journey is ended."

And now, at last, they were safe. Safe.

He stared around the cabin almost wildly, his fingers twitching. He saw the moldy walls of an ill-built waterfront shack, the unglazed, high aperture that served for window, letting out what heat he could coax from the reluctant fire. He climbed on the rickety stool, and stuffed the opening with his buff-coat, and piled on more logs as the woman returned, shivering with the cold that lay between the house and shed.

She stood a candlestick on the table, and put a bowl of mush beside it. Then she moved to the bench where Gerry lay.

When she turned away, her lips were tight. "I'll send my lad for Mistress Hutchinson," she said. "She'll know the cure, if there is one."

The name was a friendly hand. Ajax felt the tears of relief spring to his eyes, and turned away that she might not see his weakness.

"Tell her it's a friend of Harry Vane's," he said, "that's in sore need of her."

The woman smiled a bit sourly. "She'd come, though 'twas for the devil himself," she said.

"How is it she has no fear of the disease? She has children, hasn't she?"

"A full quiver, as I had once."

"Forgive me," said Ajax. "I—am greatly troubled."

She went, without answering. He returned to Gerry, and knelt beside him. The boy's lids had parted. Through the slit, Ajax saw his eyes, fever bright. He wound his arms around him as if he would hold death at bay.

"God, let me die— Let me die, but let this child live. I have fulfilled my years, in sin and sorrow. But he will serve You truly. Oh, God, don't let him suffer so. He's so little, and so helpless—"

The words broke through his control, phrased by Gerry's tortured breathing. How long he knelt there, Ajax did not know. He only knew that as he watched, his heart broke slowly.

He had never known that he could love so greatly, much less a child—this child of carelessness and shame. In every small anguished feature he discovered Gerald, Gerald, who was dying before him, the tragic victim of his stubborn pride.

The minutes, the hours no longer made time. He knelt between two lifetimes. When Gerry cried out, looking up for an instant with wide frightened eyes, he smoothed the sweaty hair from the paling forehead, and rose from his knees, knowing that with the child he had stepped from one life to another.

He did not hear the door open, nor a woman come into the room. He only knew the dying fire leaped up, quickened by wind that entered with her. Even after the door had been closed again, the sense of freedom and space and strength remained.

She had a great hamper hooked over her arm. She set it on the table, and put off her cloak, and brushed the graying

hair back from her high, serene forehead. Her eyes flamed in her pale calm face. They seemed to warm the whole room.

She crossed to him quietly, without explanation or apology, moving with the grace of assurance and unpampered muscles. She looked at Gerry, and then deep into Ajax's eyes. In that look, Ajax knew why Vane had loved her. It held the compassion, the peace, lying only within the gift of great suffering conquered.

He put out his hand, and caught hers desperately. She did not wince at his grip. She only put her other hand for a moment on his shoulder, and he felt courage and strength flow into him, and remembered the ancient power of the laying-on of hands.

"The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away," she said. Her quiet robbed the words of triteness. Ajax heard his own voice, suddenly strong:

"Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

Then he bowed his head in his hands, and wept, unashamed.

XVI

OVER THE Isle of Errors, dawn came slowly. It flung long shadows on the ground, the ice-glazed Moshassuck: blue-white trees, a dozen blue-white houses, lay elongated on the yellow-white snow, the gray-white river ice.

Ajax opened the cabin door, and the thin accurate fingers of the cold reached in and closed about him. He stepped out, and shut the door after him, and his mouth sharpened with the realization of the impulse that had prompted him to keep the sparse warmth in the cabin for Gerry—Gerry, who was colder than the winter, whose chill body would not warm with spring.

Anne Hutchinson had crossed to the house to arrange for the child's burial. He saw her now returning, holding her cloak about her, but erect, not bending to the wind as a lesser woman would.

He opened the cabin door, and as she passed him she put her hand for a moment on his forearm, as if she leaned on him for the single step up, over the threshold, but he read in the gesture a deeper meaning. It banished the awful loneliness that must have seized him when she said:

"Tonight will be best. We feel it would be wise not to wait. The cold—"

He nodded, tight lipped. The earth froze swiftly here, and men were loath to thaw it with fire. Every white burial was a triumph to the savages, and every shrub and tree concealed the swift black eyes, the silent feet, of Pequot scouts.

She said, "Afterward, you will return with me."

He tried to answer, but he could not. He knew that she did not want thanks. He remembered what Vane had told him of her trial, what had leaked through to England in letters from her friends. A pregnant woman who could stand

for days, refuting the arguments and persuasions of the finest and best-trained minds of her age, was not sustained alone by the strength of the flesh. The thanks he would return to her must be offered to a higher Source.

How deep that thanks would be he did not realize until he stood that night, surrounded by shadows, watching another shadow split the frozen earth. There had been no funeral, no ritual such as they had all known, at home, as a fitting farewell for those whom they had loved. But as he stood beside Anne Hutchinson, one voice, clear and quiet, bridged the awful space between the dead and living.

"*I know that my Redeemer liveth.*"

That was all. The ancient words, reaching back toward the dawn of man, searching forward to eternity, filled all the white darkness under the star-swept sky. The ghostly thudding of the frozen clods on Gerry's little body was lost, defeated by that great I KNOW.

They went back to the Hutchinsons' together: Ajax and Anne, her son, Will, and her daughter Anne, and the Reverend William Collins, young Anne's betrothed, and the lovely Mary Dyer and her husband. There was no word of death spoken by any of them. Even when Master Hutchinson, whose illness had made it impossible for him to go to the burial, came forward to greet Ajax, the only sign of his sympathy was the slightly longer handclasp of his still-powerful hand.

What they did speak of was the living: the great movement going forward in England. Ajax told of Strafford's imprisonment, of the apprentices' rebellion. Anne's eyes kindled.

"Tell me of that brave man, Quartermayn," she urged. "I hear he has quite confounded the High Commission, and that they have sent him to the Privy Council."

"He refused to be sworn," Ajax said, "and his followers threw the whole Court into a turmoil. The nicest happening, in my opinion, was when one of the Court officers

accused them of being Puritans, and when asked why he considered them so, admitted it was because they all 'looked upward.' "

"Thereby accusing themselves of earthy interests," Anne laughed.

Ajax discovered she laughed often, with the honest, unmalicious laughter of a child. He had not thought of her laughing, but always as a serious, almost dour person, giving off flashes of spiritual brilliance, rather like a night sky, awful with lightning. Instead, he saw her now as a field, under a noon sun, powerful and life-giving, productive for the future, fearless of the feet which might trample it, because of sure knowledge of the seed within.

He did not guess at first the weight of the burden she was carrying. She was teaching here as she had taught in Boston, and her courage flowed from her into the timid and apprehensive of Aquidneck as it had in Massachusetts. Only when, one day in midwinter, Dr. Clark told Ajax that her husband would not recover, and he remembered Vane's quiet, ". . . a man she loves beyond all else," did he realize how deep her courage really was.

That night, as they sat before the fire, he said quietly, "If the people of the Plantation will let me, I shall remain in Providence."

She looked up quickly, and as their eyes met he knew she understood his meaning—that, after William Hutchinson was gone, his strength would be at her service.

She said slowly, "I am sure they would be glad to have you, Master Stacy. There are a number of home lots on Town Street, in the shelter of Prospect Hill. If I were building, I would choose one of them. As it is—" she looked around the small room, and he remembered flashingly the fine house in Boston—"I shall be contented to dwell here, as long as Will is."

He knew then that she knew her husband would not "dwell here" long. He said, "And afterward?"

She moved her hand slightly. It was a moment before she spoke. "When I came here, a number of my friends came with me, you know. Some of them are still here. One or two, like Master Coddington, have gone on. But for the sake of those who remain— Master Stacy, I do not know how much you may know of what preceded my removal from Boston."

The statement was a question. He said quickly, "Harry Vane is one of my closest friends," and saw her mouth soften at the name. "I have a message for you from him."

He thought for a moment that she hesitated, but almost at once, she nodded, and her eyes met his clearly, as he repeated it. When he had finished, she drew a deep breath, and Ajax saw she held her head a little higher.

"He will be given the opportunity to serve greatly," she said. "Never fear. The Mark is on him." A small silence fell, and then she went on, "You asked about my plans. Naturally, I have no plans—now. I am only trudging along a path laid out for me. Afterward— Afterward, I must go on. I do not know, yet, where. Possibly as far away as New Amsterdam. No—don't be surprised. It's not a matter of my free will, you understand. But my instinct has been whetted by circumstance, by experience. The Massachusetts has already made two attempts to draw Aquidneck back under its rule. Only a few weeks back, they sent messengers offering to forgive us our sins and heresies, and permit us to rejoin them." Her smile flashed and faded. It held no bitterness, only a swift amusement. "We refused to receive them in Council, and then we took them to our own homes, and fed them and slept them—and sent them off home, with full bellies, and journey baskets, as befitted old friends. But it is not vanity that warns me this is no last attempt, nor am I ignorant of the reason behind the advances."

She sighed, and rose, and fretted the fire. When she returned to her place, on the high-backed settle, there was

the dignity about her that befitted this daughter of the Marburys.

"I cannot jeopardize my friends' safety, nor can I compromise with my God. When the hour strikes, I shall go on."

Ajax rose and filled his long pipe, and stood smoking in silence. There was no answer to her decision. In his heart, he knew that she was right, even as he rebelled against it. For he knew that he, too, would "go on"—that he could not remain in Aquidneck, with Anne Hutchinson gone, and the pitiful memory of Gerry reaching out to him every time he passed the waterfront cabin where the child had died.

Yet he knew he did not want to go to New Amsterdam, and he would not go to Gerald in Virginia until he was established, his own master, independent, if not prosperous.

Through all the other considerations, he remembered Sarah Cotton's generous effort to keep him in Boston, the advice and warnings of the others. Possibly, when the spring came—Gerry had been happy in Boston.

He smiled, and said suddenly, "Oddly, your flight from Boston is like to drive me back into it!" and she laughed, easily, understanding.

"I have been homesick for it more than once since I left," she admitted, "but mind you don't tell them so, when you return!"

XVII

It was not yet March. New England lay in its white death still, and Ajax, exhausted like the barren earth with the terrible effort of life, shared its healing rest. The First Month would come, and with it the resurrection of the dead, and he knew he would arise and accept his burden and go forth in that hour; but for a little, he was content to wait, as the earth waited.

At Feathergrant, the clamoring birds awoke Gerald to each new day. He leaned out, and drew aside the curtains, and lay watching them: the white heron, strutting on slender coral legs, the Virginia nightingale with its scarlet plumage, flaunting their proud mating to the dawn. At such times he thought of the English spring, sweet with the tempered, decorous sweetness of a maiden, mincing through rose paths, fragrant but well-defined. Here, spring raced on bare, strong-muscled feet, lusty and unashamed, magnificently fecund.

The vines were insidious, the suckers thrust up from forgotten roots. The semicircle reaching from the site of the great house to the river, and dedicated to Clarissa's garden, blossomed with unprophesied wildflowers, and in the surrounding woods the fallow deer dropped four fawns.

Spring had come early, this year—earlier than they had dared to hope. Now, incredulously, he and Clarissa knew that the winter was past, knew that they had survived. The tobacco had yielded enough for bare necessities. Contrary to the Indian fashion of stripping the leaves from the stalk, the English dried both, and crumbled leaf and stalk together, and the yield saved from the field had raised a meager barrier between them and starvation. Beans and pumpkins, hazelnuts and crab apples, had served them well,

after the bright plums and heavily clustered persimmons, and grapes from vines thick as Gerald's wrist, failed. Twice, Gerald had shot bear, and once an Indian had brought in a deer. They salted down as much as the powder tub would hold, and froze what the small shed would keep secure from the little foxlike wolves, which grew so bold with winter they would eat a horse, tethered by a traveler's side. Gerald and Clarissa and the blacks gorged on the rest of the meat, like wild beasts after a kill, forcing themselves to eat it disguised with hoarded herbs and spices, long after it was too rank to swallow plain.

They had built a lean-to on the cabin before the first snow flew. They had put up a great stone chimney, around whose nine-foot opening bright copper and pewter reflected the candlelight. With the rough-hewn table and bench drawn before it, it was the nucleus of home. So they had survived.

And now it was spring, and the slight surplus from the first year's crop was bearing fruit. Gerald had bought seed and stock with it: a mare and a pair of English goats. With the strong black woman Rawlins had given him for Nera, they were a nucleus of fertility. Seeing the Negress, heavy with child, lolling in the sunlight, Gerald wondered why he had not immediately realized this inevitable increase to his resources, as he would with a ewe or broodmare. His attitude to the blacks puzzled him when he stopped to think of it. They were between human and animal, displaying an inconvenient initiative, when you thought of them as animals; stupid past endurance when you treated them as men.

Clarissa, however, knew no such doubts. From the day she had caught the whip from Gerald's hand, she ruled them unquestioningly, though once more she had returned to the soft-voiced, gently smiling lady of her first weeks at Feathergrant. The strange part was that their regard for her had grown. Respect and unquestioning faith in her edged affection. Like intelligent animals, they realized that

in an emergency Clarissa would not flinch, and that their own safety, their very lives, depended on this. Little by little, their existence merged with their masters', and both were rooted in the soil.

Clarissa moved slowly, now, and Gerald could not kiss the shadows from her eyes, even when he laughed at her fears, and reminded her she must not think of her hour for two long months more. At such times, Clarissa searched his face, and was amazed to discover in it only contentment.

"I—have a presentiment," she faltered, but he only laughed at her, and kissed the hands with which she had covered her face, thinking, *He must guess. Surely, he must guess!*

She knew too well the old black woman, Naomi, had guessed. If she had not feared to rouse Gerald's suspicions, she would have sent her away, anywhere, to Rawlins, into the wilderness, anywhere to be rid of her fawning mocking attentions. She felt the old woman did not like her, but never dreamed the depth of her hatred, sprung from Nera's banishment, and tempered only by her gratitude and affection for Gerald. Gerald's joy in Clarissa and Clarissa's child were her sole safeguard against the old woman's spleen.

Until the hour of her confession, Clarissa had never thought of a man's joy in fatherhood. Certainly, she would never have imagined Gerald could care so greatly. His whole interest centered on the child. For its sake he denied himself everything, even the joy of her body. So had the quickening come without his suspicion, so had she grown great without his full knowledge. When she considered his happiness she marveled. *And yet, why not?* she thought. *What is it but his vanity, his strutting pride in his own perpetuation?* And the hysterical laughter that had choked her on their wedding night was liberated at last, to rush across the hills and forests of Feathergrant.

At Gerald's urging, they had chosen the site for the great house the day after he learned it was to have an heir. It

would crown the lowest hill, set back a couple of hundred yards from the bank, and when the forest had been cleared, it would overlook the curve of water, as if the river itself had been planned for a symmetrical setting for it. From the house to the bank, there would be three terraces, tasteful with a rose garden, a box maze, and knots, in the finest English manner. Clarissa listened, and smiled dutifully, and thought, *Some day. Some day—when I am old and feeble and too wrinkled to care, I may have all these things. A little Queen! I shall be an aged harridan like old Bess, with my hair dyed Abraham-color with powdered box.* And her eyes clouded with another thought: *There will be other women to enjoy them. Young women. Women beautiful as I am now.* And she felt within her a watchful fear of her unborn daughters, of the wives of her unborn sons.

She had long since ceased to consider the life within her as a part of herself. When her child was born, it would mark the entry into her life of another individual whom she could never escape. Before he was born, she looked on him as on his father, with mingled passions, with a consuming love and a destroying hate. *Sooner or later, she thought, he will betray me as Ajax did.*

She was thinking of these things, sitting on the hillside, with her chin on her hand, and the comforting sun of late February on her back, when she saw Rawlins's log boat round the river curve, picking its way between the last floes broken from the bank. There were three figures in it besides himself: the two black rowers, and another, huddled in the bottom, covered with bright blankets, so that it seemed only a heap of brilliant cloth. As the boat grated against the landing, it stirred. Nera raised her head.

Rawlins saw Clarissa, and ran up the bank to her. "I have taken a liberty without your leave. But I trust you will not mind my bringing Nera back. She wanted to be with Naomi and her husband. I suppose it's natural enough."

"Natural?" Clarissa echoed. "Why should it be natural? What husband?"

Rawlins's eyes flashed to her face, and away. "Hannibal. Nera was wed to him before your coming. I thought you knew." He looked back toward the boat. Nera had risen, was leaving it heavily. Clarissa knew why Rawlins had said it was natural for her to want to be with her "husband." Unreasoning resentment shook her. Rawlins said, "Naomi was the midwife in her own village." But Clarissa did not hear him. She was already hurrying toward the cabin driven by nauseating anger and confusion. She dared not object to Nera's coming, lest Gerald suspect her suspicion of him. She thought, *What if the black girl's child is born with Gerald's eyes, or look, or manner?* And clamped her doubt behind set teeth, remembering always that her security rested on Gerald's true love, which in turn was founded upon her own deceit.

But the turmoil surging within her increased, until it overwhelmed her, and she drew away from the fire where Rawlins and Gerald smoked their long pipes placidly, unaware of her pounding temples and strangling breath. When she could no longer bear it, she rose, and went to the door, and flung it open and fell back screaming as her first pain, unheralded, flashed through her, swift and bright and terrible as lightning.

Gerald and Rawlins caught her, as she collapsed, fighting for breath. In a moment, Naomi had come, the mockery in her eyes changed to triumph, as she realized the accuracy of her own calculations.

That look recalled Clarissa. The pain had passed, now, but she knew beyond doubt that her hour had come. She must think, think swiftly, grateful that Gerald was too disturbed to think yet.

He was rushing back and forth, ordering Naomi and Rawlins to do impossible, ridiculous things. Neither of

them heeded him. Rawlins had grabbed a great iron pot from the crane, and was already halfway to the brook. Naomi, having loosed Clarissa's clothing, had started back to the quarters for infallible charms and powders she had been long making.

Clarissa lay and stared at Gerald, between her slitted lids. This was the time of her testing. What could she do, what could she say, that would put this moment beyond suspicion, for all the years to come?

He knelt beside her suddenly, asked frenziedly, "Clarissa—Clarissa, darling— What was it? What frightened you?"

Her eyes flew open. Fear. Shock. Of course! That would suffice. But of what? Strange, that in the wilderness, where there was so much to fear, she could think of nothing.

Gerald was urging, "Clarissa, tell me! What was it that frightened you?"

Oh, Lord, let me think of something— Let me say something—

Naomi appeared, behind Gerald. She carried two bright embroidered leather pouches, and a queer long object that undulated with her hobbling walk. Clarissa saw her, and her heart leaped with the relief of her decision.

"Look!" she shrilled, "Look! She has it! The serpent!"

Gerald spun around. He saw Naomi, advancing with slow and important dignity, her toothless gums shining with appreciation of her cleverness. He saw the stuffed rattlesnake, clutched in her skeletal hand. His yell brought Rawlins running. He grabbed Gerald's hands as they closed crazedly around the old woman's throat.

Gerald struggled with him, panting incoherent explanation. "Clarissa. She may have killed her. She may die, because that black hag—"

"Hush," Rawlins urged, "Hush. She won't die. Besides, it couldn't have been Naomi. I saw her, after Mistress Stacy screamed, and—" he stopped.

From within, Clarissa's cry, plaintive, pitifully feeble, reached them.

"Gerald— Did you get it away from her? Oh, Gerald— what was she going to do to me? Don't let her, Gerald, don't let her hurt me!"

Coming out of her travail, Clarissa heard the ring of an ax on cypress. It was the first tree cut that spring at Feathergrant, and the sound had a triumphant import, as vast as the cracking of the last ice in the river. It meant warmth, and plenty, and release from the winter's dread. But to Clarissa, it meant above all else that another human being besides herself was struggling against the awful majesty of nature.

The night had been horrible, past belief or imagining, a Purgatory of fever and firelight, with the shadows of Gerald and Rawlins and Naomi twisting and writhing on walls and ceilings, brooding over her like the avenging Fates.

More than once, in her semiconsciousness, she had believed herself again in England, but always her agony recalled her. In England, she would have been attended by a midwife, or even a doctor skilled in these matters, not by a maundering ancient Negress, who, deprived of her charms and potions, was more helpless than the men.

Under Naomi's pottering ministrations, Clarissa sensed disdain for the anguish of a weakling, in a matter so lightly accomplished by women of her own race. At any moment, one of the black women would be brought to bed, and would make no such matter of bearing. Her broad pelvis, her organs unwarped by lacing, her free muscles, her untroubled nerves—all these things would combine to make a stuffed rattlesnake sufficient safeguard for her life and her child's successful delivery.

In the clairvoyance of her pain, Clarissa knew all this, and hated alike the blacks who scorned her and the whites

powerless to relieve her torment. Surely the wilderness was a cruel place, a cruel and bitter place. Life and death pressed on her, companioning her with indecent intimacy. She felt she could not bear it, that the cabin was filled with presences, that she had not even air to breathe.

She cried to Gerald and Rawlins to leave her, and when they went, was engulfed in impotent loneliness.

Oh, God, she thought, how low am I brought by my sins, that I must bear in the wilderness an unwanted child, with none but a black slave to deliver me!

When Gerald, called back by Naomi with word of the boy's birth, stood beside Clarissa, the stench of his sweat sickened her, and she turned her head and vomited weakly on the earthen floor. The picture of her exquisite London drawing room, of its flowers and ivories and candles and bric-à-brac swam before her, and she whimpered with helplessness and a sense of degradation.

Naomi put the child in Gerald's arms. His choked "My son!" changed Clarissa's whimpering to faint laughter. She imagined the mockery at Court, had Gerald appeared there with that look of dazed and fatuous credulity. But mockery shifted to stark terror with Gerald's exclamation. "Clarissa—have you looked well at the boy? Before God, he has the look of Ajax! Look!" He crossed to her quickly, and held the hideous red creature toward her, but her eyes searched Gerald's face, not the child's. The astonishment, the shock, Gerald had shown turned before her eyes to a radiance that seemed to glow from him. "He has named himself. He is Ajax. My darling, I know you would have given him my name, of your great love for me—but my brother—God knows where he is, what may have befallen him. Let me feel that his name will live, whatever has overtaken him. Sometimes, I feel no woman could understand how dear he was to me, Clarissa." He urged it, overriding what he felt was natural hesitation, laying the child beside her, to kiss her white drawn face. "I would love him more greatly

if he bore Ajax's name, than mine, if that could be, my Clarissa."

She drew a long breath, and said, "Very well. If that is your will, husband."

"Clarissa— Darling— Oh, my darling—" He knelt beside her, covering her face and throat and hands with kisses, contrite as she turned her face from him. "I have wearied you. You are exhausted. My beloved—rest— Try to rest—"

"What is that?" she asked, as the sound of the ax rang out again.

Instantly, Gerald was on his feet. He ran to the door and looked out. He returned, his face alight. "It is Feathergrant. It is the beginning of all I have planned for your delight, my Clarissa. In this hour, the first spadeful of earth was dug, the first tree is being felled. Our son will know and remember it, always. He, and his sons, and his grandsons."

Resentment, cold jealousy, possessed her. She had sent Gerald from her because she could no longer bear the oppressive intimacy of his presence; but she had thought of him, in the brief moments of release from her travail, as staying near by, anxious, terrified as she. Instead, he had slipped from her down the generations, out of her life, out of her knowledge or imagination, when he should have been crying aloud to his God for mercy on her anguish.

Gerald was saying, "It is fitting, symbolic, it should be born with him. It will be his, more truly than it will ever be ours, Clarissa."

Clarissa turned her face from him. Her small teeth bared, but she made no other sign. *His*, she thought. *His*.

The conflict had begun between her and the son of Ajax.

XVIII

CLARISSA HAD climbed the hill, to look at the site of the great house. It was the first time she had attempted so long a walk since the child's birth, but Gerald's eagerness and the beauty of the day had overcome her excuses.

The blacks had seen her coming, and stood nudging each other, grinning and touching their forelocks, eager for her approval. She stood looking down at the foundation, the outline of the small place that was to compass her life, and thought of Stacys Holding, and the promise, *A little Queen*, and curbed the irony that welled in her, and smiled with her lips. She was thankful that Gerald, at the moment of their starting, had seen a ship turning the curve of the river and run down to the landing to get news from home. She had pretended not to hear his call to wait, and hastened her steps. She had wanted to look at the new house alone, to bring it under her domination, without suggestion or interference.

Little by little, she pictured the hollow oblong filled: it lay with its full length toward the river, and through it, from front to back, would be the hall, such as in the other planters' houses had proved most practical for the climate. At the front and back, a wide doorway would admit the rare breezes that might stir in the hot summer, but a heavy door at each end, of oak planking three or four inches thick, would serve as protection from the winter winds, or Indian forays. On the left, there would be a single room, the great room, its length the full twenty-eight feet of the house's width, its width, one third of the house's length—fourteen feet. And across the fourteen-foot hall, there would be a square chamber toward the river, and two rooms at the rear,

a buttery and storeroom. Upstairs, beneath the roof of cypress shingles, there would be two other chambers.

By Clarissa's wish, the cooking in winter would be done in a sort of attached shed, at a fireplace as vast as that of the Great Room; in summer, as was customary, it would be done outdoors.

The house itself would be of cypress and oak, ceiled with cedar; the shingled roof of cypress. When it was finished, it would be as fine as any house on the river.

But Clarissa never thought of it as a box twenty-eight by forty-two feet. From the day that Gerald had shown her the first plans, she had begun to add to it. When the time came, there would be broad ells at either side. The cedar walls would be hung with prints and tapestries. The modest garden would spread, as the tobacco ate the near-by soil, and the planting fields progressed into the broad, forest-grown acres Gerald had told her were all his. Gerald had thought of these things, if at all, as dreams their children might fulfill. Clarissa stretched out her slim arms, fingers straining toward the future, curving slowly inward, and she drew them to her breast. At this moment, they lay within the black soil. She planted her feet more firmly on it, and the years shrank in her determination.

She started, when Gerald's call pierced her concentration. He was running toward her, waving something, crying out, his meaning obscured with high-pitched excitement. Even then, Clarissa was not warned. She thought, *The viewing law has been altered*, and started toward him, smiling.

He was within a few feet of her when she caught his words. "It's Ajax— I've heard from him at last! Oh, my darling— Oh, Clarissa— He's alive! He's here—and coming!"

The javelin words struck through her. She felt her life-blood rushing from the wound, until she was white, insensitive. She said, "Coming—here?"

Gerald laughed, and caught her in his arms, and spun her around wildly. "Oh, not today, or even next week. He

only says, 'When I am fully established.' But Clarissa—he's alive! Do you realize it? Ajax is alive!"

"I realize it," Clarissa whispered, and repeated testingly, "Ajax is alive."

Gerald felt her hesitation. "But aren't you glad?" he asked, puzzled, and his question loosed the prisoned cry within her.

"Yes! I am glad!"

It was true. It was true, though from this hour she must walk in dread of Gerald's discovery. Ajax was alive: the arms that had held her, the mouth that had inflamed her, the breast that had lain on hers—all the magnificent body that had possessed her for a night—and for her lifetime. Ajax was alive, and living, he must love her. The hope that had lain like embers beneath the ash of circumstance leaped to flame. *There will be other nights, other nights.*

Yet in that moment, chill touched her. What else had Ajax said in that letter? Had Gerald read it all, or only the first few lines? What if he had told Gerald of that night at Stacys Holding? It was not impossible, she realized, recalling how Ajax had cried aloud his hatred of her, how he had branded his passion redress for her refusal of Gerald. What was it he had called it? "Betrayal." Betrayal, to reject a suitor. Yet, if he felt so, what would he say when he knew she had married Gerald?

She exclaimed, "Gerald, when you write him—when you answer this—do not tell him about us."

"Not tell him—? But Clarissa, you have no idea how he would rejoice in it. Not a month before we were parted, he begged me to marry." He stopped, wondering how to explain that he had hoped to blunt even the sting of his banishment by telling Ajax that she was to share it.

"Then if it will be such joy to him, wait. Wait until he comes, and you can see his face." *Wait until he comes, and the sight of my face, the knowledge our lives are not over, strikes through him as it has through me, making all other*

knowledge pale and meaningless. "What else does he say?"

"Very little. He has taken up his residence in Aquidneck, for the winter, but hints he may return to the Bay when spring comes there. He hopes later by industry and good management to be a citizen of substance. But I have other news! God's final Name, Clarissa—imagine my forgetting it, even so briefly! The latest ship brings word that Strafford is in the Tower, and Laud under indictment. Prynne is returned, wagging his earless head at Parliament, and it is rumored they listen with sufficient ears to his witness to make up his lack. I'll wager now His Grace laments he did not pull out his tongue, as well as crop him!"

"But, Gerald— If this is so—" She could not go on. If this were so, would Ajax return to Stacys Holding? Would he be torn from her, at the moment she had flung out her arms to receive him? She said warily, "If you could, would you return?"

"Return!" The laughter faded from Gerald's face. "Return? Clarissa, would you?"

Would she? Her eyes strayed over the hills of Feathergrant, over the ploughed earth, the rising hint of green, the foundation of the great house. *A little Queen.* Yet, if Ajax returned to England—

"I do not know," she said slowly. "It is too great a matter to decide quickly. What do they say will be the outcome?"

"They say it is quite possible there will be more than one block on Tower Hill. The King himself is powerless to curb the unrest. London is filled with marchers. When they carried a fellow named Quartermayn before the High Commission, more than a thousand Puritans went beside him, and rioted in the Convocation Hall, and drove out the Court, and they had to send him under cover to Southwark, lest the prison itself should be torn apart to release him." He shook his head, his lips tight. "God knows I have little fondness for Laud, but I pray it may be settled peaceably. There is little to be gained by bloodshed. In a

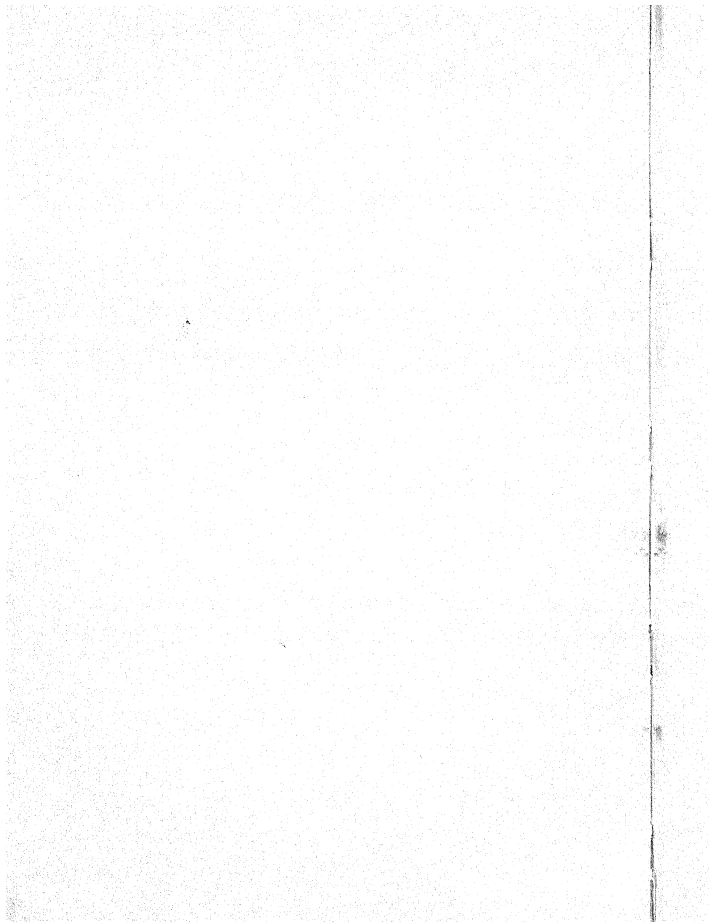
war with other lands, there may be wealth or power from victory, but in a civil war, whatever the outcome, there is only defeat."

Clarissa was not listening. She cared little for obscure Puritan lecturers, or Laud himself. But she was not fool enough to think such matters would have no effect upon her own security. A pebble dropped in the Thames must, by some secret devious channel, lift the level of the James.

She said, "At least, for a little—we are safe here—" and felt the black soil, soggy with spring, and fecund with their future, suck up around her feet.

III

FEATHERGRANT



I

IT WAS All Saints' Eve when Ajax stepped ashore from his own ship at Feathergrant. He had not warned Gerald of his coming, for twice before such promises had proven fruitless; once, when drought had withered two years' labor to ashes of bitterness, and once when a great storm had swallowed the first small vessel he had owned. Now, he had two other ships, one, God grant, in the Indies, and the other a month overdue when he had left Boston, to which he had returned, when the Hutchinsons had left Aquidneck. But he would wait no longer. Whatever came of it, he was at last established. At last, he was free to seek Gerald.

He wanted no witnesses to that meeting. After a few words of instruction, he waved his lads off, in spite of their curious glances, bidding them lie at Jamestown till his coming. He watched them around the curve of river, before he turned, pulling in his sea-trained eyes to an expanse of broad fields, fenced by forest, and a garden sweeping upward in three terraces, to a hilltop house.

It was all quite perfect, England in miniature. Yet as he looked, he felt something strange about it. He had thought of his reunion with Gerald as a renewal of the old days—of Feathergrant as a new world Stacys' Holding. But he realized at once there was a difference. It was not alone in the black figures, hoeing in time to a primal half-chanted half-wailed song, nor the newness of the house, nor the height of the trees. These things might be different, but were not essentially inimical to his dreams. It was, he decided, a neatness, almost a primness. And like a thunderbolt, it struck him: this was a woman's place.

It could not be Feathergrant. His instructions must have been wrong. He turned, waving wildly for his ship to re-

turn, and realized it was past hailing. There was nothing to do now but stay the night, and beg transportation to Gerald's in the morning. Disappointment keen as a child's swept him, and he pouted like a child, unaware that it made him look ludicrously young, in spite of his thirty years and massive frame and weather-browned skin.

At that moment, the door opened, and a woman appeared. She was small and slender, and the sun and wind made an aureole of her hair. She was so like Clarissa that Ajax's breath caught in a shuddering sob, and he stood watching her, his heart pounding in his throat, his powerful hands clenching and unclenching emptily. Until that moment, he had believed her fever driven from his blood. Now, he knew that it would never be, until he died. He could no more force it from his veins by wishing it gone than conquer the scurvy by mumbling incantations, like the savages.

The woman left the house, hurried to the side where a pair of slaves were pruning rosebushes. Ajax breathed again. She was not Clarissa, for Clarissa moved with small discreet steps, and used her hands with timid fragility, and this woman walked with assurance, and her gestures were commands. After a moment, she passed from sight, and he started slowly toward the house, wiping the sweat from his cold face.

The sound of wild riding stopped him on the second terrace. A man streaked from the woods, riding planter's pace, pulling his unshod horse up sharply as he saw the figure in his path. Gerald, in leather breeches and a blue holland shirt, open at the throat. Gerald, more beautiful than he had ever been in velvet and lace and jewels, Ajax thought, wondering suddenly what the years had done to him, aside from calloused hands and sea wrinkles at his eyes, from staring at bright horizons.

Gerald flung himself from his horse, seized his shoulders, looked at him as if he had laid hands on a ghost. "Ajax—

Ajax—"He said it over and over, like a charm to turn ghost to flesh, and then with a laugh that was half cry, "God, man, you're grown handsome!"

Ajax said nothing. They stood staring at each other, incredulously.

The woman came back, around the house. Gerald felt Ajax stiffen in his grip, saw the light go from his face. He looked up and saw her.

"It's my wife, Clarissa. You remember Clarissa!"

"Yes," said Ajax, almost inaudibly. It was the first word he had spoken. "I remember Clarissa."

Clarissa came forward. Over Gerald's shoulder, Ajax had seen her pale and flush and pale again. "Welcome, brother," she said. "Welcome—to Feathergrant."

She extended her hand, and Ajax took it fumblingly. It lay in his palm, very small, very cold.

Gerald, under some urge he could not define, babbled, "I would have written you of my happiness, but Clarissa would have none of it. She said you would be surprised, and—"

"I am surprised."

"We expected you daily," Clarissa said. Her eyes held Ajax's, unashamed, making no effort at concealment. It was as if she had said, I have been expecting you, daily, hourly, with every breath, with every beat of my heart. "You have a way of eluding one," she said, and her smile was the flick of a lash on an open wound.

They went into the house. A child came toward them. He did not run, and fling himself on Gerald, as little Gerry would have. He walked decorously, setting his feet down with a dignity past his years. His great eyes questioned Ajax as an elder's might have.

Gerald swooped, and set the child on his shoulder. Only then did he smile. "How do you like your namesake?" he demanded. "This is our Ajax. Young man, this is the

uncle whose name you bear with such dignity and discretion." He rolled the child from his shoulder, hugged him, and set him on his feet.

Ajax half knelt, and held out his hands. "Ajax," he repeated. "I—am grateful to you."

The child took his hands quietly. "I am glad you have come," he piped. "I have heard a great deal about you."

"Have you! Well, now. Bless me. It was all undoubtedly quite wrong, of course. I am a very different person from what I was—then."

Over the boy's head, his eyes met Clarissa's. She smiled briefly, and left them together.

Instantly, a change came over the child. He reached up, and caught Ajax's forelock, and gave it a smart tweak.

"Good God!" cried Ajax. "Are you trying to scalp me?"

"He thinks it's a wig," Gerald explained. "So many gentlemen hereabouts cover their baldness with wigs."

"And you tweak them off, do you? What are you raising here, Gerald? A Prynne?"

"I've thought for some time the lad would be a roundhead like his uncle, if Clarissa continued perfecting him," Gerald laughed. "She is so exquisite, so perfect, she cannot let him alone. She'll turn him into a preacher, or—"

"Or a cutthroat," Ajax snorted. "The Stacy men aren't given to decorum. She might have learned that, by now."

He spoke so bitterly, that Gerald, puzzled, frowned. "You should wed," he said. "You must not allow yourself to get crusty. Marriage is the only solution for us who have lost a world: in it, we find we can establish a new world, and even people it to our liking." He put out his arm and drew the child to his side. "I have another lad, also. Gerald. He's two, now. There's no joy like fatherhood, Ajax. A man touches God most nearly, giving life." He put the boy away, pridefully. "Look at him! There's a manling for you! See the set of his head and the strength of those legs. Whatever the Book says, I'm sure God *does* delight in them, as I do.

You'd never think, to see him now, he was premature, would you?"

The indulgence on Ajax's face froze. Presentiment struck through him. "Premature?" he echoed.

Gerald seemed not to notice the tone. He took the child in his lap, nuzzling the warm neck lovingly.

"We had been wed a bare seven months," he announced proudly, and laughed, adding, "I tell you, Ajax, this is a prolific land. It is no New England, which I have heard is barren as Rachel. Here, we set about the business of life with great dispatch. Don't we, son?" He kissed the child, grinning. "You did, certainly."

Ajax said, "I have not yet heard—how you came to wed Clarissa."

"I did not come to wed her. She came to wed me. God, Ajax, can you imagine a woman loving a man so greatly? She followed me out here—"

"When?"

"Five months after I came. She arrived in July. The cruellest season we have. The strongest men die, lacking seasoning. But Clarissa—that exquisite, fragile creature—I tell you, Ajax, we never knew anything about women, you and I!"

"No. We never did."

There was a small sound. Clarissa stood in the doorway. Over Gerald's head her eyes met Ajax's. There was mockery in them and a cold triumph. The fear that had companioned her from the night she had lain at Stacys Holding had left her. Seeing Ajax with Gerald, she knew that he would never denounce her, however he hated her. What he felt for his child, God knew. But seeing the brothers together, she knew that Ajax loved Gerald as his God.

Under her scrutiny, he turned quickly, torn as he had been torn that first night, between hate and passion. His swift movement knocked over a bibelot, and he stooped to gather the fragments, cursing under his breath.

Clarissa came forward smoothly. She said with mock solicitude, "Brother! I trust that you are not indisposed?"

Ajax straightened. His jaw jutted leanly, and through narrowed lids his gaze gimleted hers.

"On the contrary, my dear sister," he said, "I have never before felt so utterly completed."

II

CLARISSA ENTERED the hall suddenly, and found Ajax staring at the oriel above the stairs. It was a duplicate of that at Stacys Holding—the crest of the Stacys—two right hands clasping a javelin; but across it had been impaled a draggled golden feather. Clarissa said:

"I trust you like it, brother. I have small taste for it, myself. The arms are well enough, but that—that foolish feather—" she laughed petulantly. She never saw the thing without thinking of Nera, naked on Gerald's bed, the feather across her breasts.

Ajax turned slowly. "Possibly he felt this was the latest distinction vouchsafed by our King, and so, appropriate," he said.

"Possibly. I cannot say. To this hour, I have never heard the full tale of it, but I would hardly blazon it as an honor for my heirs."

She crossed the hall, and entered the great room, Ajax following, in obedience to her half gesture. There was a small silence, while she lit the myrtle tapers on the mantelshelf. "It is growing cool," she said. "We shall soon need to rekindle the fires." She seated herself where the candlelight glimmered on her hair. After a moment, she said, "I trust you are comfortable here. I fear there is small diversion we can offer. Still, if there is anything you desire, to complete your pleasure—" she met his eyes, her own glowing. They said, Take what you will. It is yours. I am yours.

Ajax met the look squarely. "I have had small diversion since I left Stacys Holding. When I left England, I abandoned such matters."

"Oh? And do you never miss what you abandoned there?"

"I do not permit myself to think of it."

"God save us, what a Puritan you are becomel" Clarissa laughed shortly. "I marvel you do not at once return to England, to assist in hanging His Grace!"

"You seem sure of the outcome before the sentencing," Ajax said. "But in any event, I have done what work I had to do in England. My life is filled."

"Filled? Yet surely—if a matter of sufficient importance arose—"

"It will not."

"La, how fortunate you are to control your fate so neatly!" she laughed, but her eyes mocked him, as she snuffed the candles, so that they might perfume the room with their sweetness. "I prefer to accept what may arise."

"Still?"

Clarissa flushed, but met his eyes. "Surely, even you will grant it would be folly to deny any pleasure that may seek me out, in the wilderness!"

"Surely—provided it sought you. But I am sure you, like myself, would not make the effort to do the seeking." He smiled at Gerald, as he entered, adding, "As for the wilderness, you cannot complain. It's turned to a garden for you!"

"No wilderness would be ungrateful enough not to blossom for Clarissa," Gerald said, and kissed her with a lover's tenderness.

Ajax turned sharply to the window. *He loves me*, Clarissa thought triumphantly. *It is torture for him to see Gerald fondle me*. She patted Gerald's cheek.

He laughed, "What do you think of a husband who can make his wife blush with a kiss? You'll admit I must be skillful!"

"No more skillful than a wife who has retained her ability to blush," Ajax retorted evenly. "But I'm sure Clarissa has lost none of her useful arts."

Clarissa said, "You must find amusement outdoors for

our brother, Gerald. He seems to have exhausted all his desires within the house."

Gerald said, "We can ride. There's not much else. I imported three greyhounds for coursing, but the fools went at such speed they broke their necks against the trees, being used to a clear track. We have cockfighting, but—"

"I am content to ride," Ajax said, and strode out so eagerly Clarissa's eyes narrowed, like a cat's at a mousehole.

No matter, she thought, *he loves me*, and remembered what Gerald had said, "It will be sweeter for the waiting."

Gerald flung his arm across Ajax's shoulders, as they went to the stable. "I am still unable to credit your seafaring," he shook his head. "Of all paths for you to follow! There—up with you, and tell me truly whether you do not prefer the feel of a horse under you to that of a deck."

Ajax smiled, and shook his head. "I love horses, and always shall. But—do you recall the excitement it was to us, when first we rode the bay pony? That is what a deck under my feet means to me, now I am a man."

"But God's final Name, you never set foot on a ship, save as a pastime, till you boarded the *Griffin*!"

"On the contrary, I was bonded to a ship when Gloriana's Marchaunt Venturers were noosing the world for her." He laughed into Gerald's puzzled eyes. "So were you, for that matter."

"You mean our grandsire?"

"Exactly. There's salt water mixed in our blood, man, and I should have known it on my outward voyage. Instead, I remained a full year ashore, half starved, and fretting at neat fences, and stout stockades, and even the forest, as if they were the very walls of the Tower. God, I'll never forget it. Bent double, cursing and pleading with the soil to yield, and waiting day after day like a rat in a trap for death to sneak from the forest. And for the rest—if you had labored from before dawn to past nightfall, with your

starved flesh withering on your bones, watching the grain swell in the stalk, knowing it was very life—and then some black midnight realized it had been days, weeks since rain had fallen, that the sky had closed as it did in the time of Elijah, that the thin yellow rim at the edge of the leaves was not the natural vexing of summer, but a pox at the heart—and watched the yellow spread inward, until the whole stalk dried and crumbled on the crusted earth, and your neighbor fell before your eyes, with the scurried blood gushing from his mouth and nostrils, and you wondered when you, too, would fall—I say if you had seen these things, you would cry aloud your gratitude for such honest foes as hurricane and pirates! These may mean death, too, but they come openly, and a man can fight them with his courage and skill.”

“No one can doubt your courage,” Gerald admitted slowly. “But your skill— God, man, you cannot navigate a ship by instinct!”

“True, but instinct tips the scales in the emergencies. And for the rest, there are plenty to teach you, in the Massachusetts! It’s over ten years since Governor Winthrop pleaded to increase the cod fisheries, and launched the *Blessing of the Bay*, and nearly two generations since the first ship was built in the new world, not too far from there. They’ve been training sailors in those parts since the year your Jamestown was settled.” He flashed a glance of laughing rivalry at Gerald. “For the rest, it’s eagerness to learn—and a decent humility.”

“You—humble?” Gerald’s brows rose quizzically.

“I lost my first ship because I refused the council of a twelve-year-old lad, who knew there was a shoal where I thought it impossible.” The muscles at his jaw line knotted whitely. “If you have never loved a ship, you cannot know what that means. The others dove overboard and swam ashore, knowing at last we were helpless. But I stayed. I stayed screaming to God for help, I stayed while the tide

fell, and she listed, and the surf rose, and the moon went under. Even then, I dared to hope. Even then I refused God's judgment on my arrogance. He had chastened me before, but I had rejected it. And now—now I stood shouting at Him, cursing and shaking my fist in His face. . . . When the storm grew great, four of them put out in a little boat for me. They risked their lives to save mine, but I refused to go with them, and they carried me by force, cursing and screaming like Bedlam, and like to swamp us all with my folly. They bound me for mad, and I lay that night like Ahab, black in mind and heart, with my face to the wall, hearing my little ship screaming and groaning, as the surf broke her, timber from timber, on the shoal where my vanity had run her." His face twisted in a smile more terrible than tears. "Since then, I have been humble. And now I have three ships."

Gerald said quietly, "You have learned more than humility, Ajax.—What was the other time?"

"The other time?"

"You spoke of this as your second chastening."

Ajax's eyes veered from Gerald's face to the purple shadows of the woods. For a moment, he hesitated, then instinct warned him. Gerald must never know of Matilda's son. Nothing must shake his false security, his happiness in his family. If he knew of Gerry, some day sparked by a word or a glance, he might wonder about Clarissa's first-born, also. The face of young Ajax, sober beyond its years, yet pierced with an elfin mischief in Clarissa's absence, rose before him.

He said, "Tell me about Ajax," and was instantly warned by Gerald's amazement against his abruptness. "I am inquiring into his tastes, no more," he smiled, "for I would like to do something for my namesake."

"Don't fret about Ajax," Gerald said, his face clearing. "He's a serious lad, and Clarissa's fondness for him makes her overcritical, at times. But doubtless he will develop, and we have a fine property ourselves, for him to inherit. Bless

you," he leaned over and clasped Ajax's arm warmly, "we did not name him for you from hope of profit!"

"Nevertheless—" Ajax hesitated, then blurted, "I would like to adopt him."

"Adopt him! But—God's final Name, Ajax—"

"I shall never marry. He would be my sole heir."

"But—our oldest son—Clarissa would never hear of it."

"Think it over. There will be time. But it isn't a bad life for a Stacy. I would give him a ship of his own to bind the bargain." His eyes sparkled. "I have one now, on her first voyage to the Indies. She's a beauty, a hundred feet long, and four hundred tons burden. She's his, the day you agree."

They turned back toward the house, talking of other things. As they approached it, the two boys turned from Clarissa's garden into the road. Gerald was dragging on his older brother's hand, fretting and pulling back. A pickaninny strutted around the side of the house, and Ajax began to run, the baby bouncing in his wake. His young voice shrilled:

"Hi, Pompey! You, Pompey!"

An upper casement opened. Clarissa's lovely head appeared. "Ajax," she said. She did not raise her voice. It was as cold, as final in its rebuke as the tone she used for the slaves.

The boy stiffened. As he turned, the two men, riding in, saw how white his face was. He did not even glance at them, but started back to the house, his steps dragging.

"God! Gerald, you must see—"

"Wait! You don't understand, Ajax. It's the pickaninny. He's Nera's son."

"Who's Nera?"

"One of the blacks. Hannibal's wife. I bought her when I first came out." His eyes strayed to the forest, returned, met Ajax's squarely. "Did you ever love a black woman?"

"If Love a— My God, Gerald, I'd as soon love an ape!"

"Yet if you remember more of our grandfather than his seafaring, you'll recall he said there was a fever in them—a

madness. Well, he was right. But Clarissa's coming ended it. I swear I never touched her from that hour. I even sent her away, told Clarissa Rawlins owned her. But she won't have her or her child in the house, though God knows he's as thick-necked and bullet-headed as the best of them, and could only have been African-spawned. It's a pity, because every other white child of quality in the colony owns his small black boy, and Ajax feels it."

Clarissa. Always Clarissa. Blocking Gerald's desires at every point.

Clarissa. How had she come here? How had she gained this ascendancy over Gerald, and the two boys, and the blacks, and the cattle, and the house and field and woods? Feathergrant was not Gerald's. It was Clarissa's, as Gerald himself was.

Yet Gerald was no weakling. No woman had ever ruled him before. And he should have been warned of Clarissa above all others. Clarissa, whose trumped-up "errand" had betrayed him.

The whole scene at Stacy's Holding, when Gerald told of his betrayal, flashed before Ajax. He saw again the bitterness of Gerald's set lips, the hurt in his eyes. The words he had kept back from the moment of his arrival broke from him.

"Gerald— We'll never speak of this again—but you must tell me! I must know! In God's Name, how did you come to wed the woman who had betrayed you?"

"I? Wed the woman who—?" Gerald's complete mystification left him wordless.

"You told me yourself you had gone on her errand, and that it was all a lie, a trap—"

"God's final Name, Ajax! Are you mad? You never imagined I was talking of Clarissa? Why, Clarissa is a saint, an angel! She never lied or plotted in her life! The woman who betrayed me was Charlotte Ponsonby."

III

AJAX FELL back as from a blow. "Not Clarissa!" he whispered, "Not— Good God, have mercy on me!"

Gerald cried, "Ajax! What is it? What's wrong with you?"

Ajax drew a shaking arm across his forehead. Already, his controlling instinct, his love for Gerald, had warned him. He stared into his eyes dully, and shook his head. "God forgive me," he murmured.

Gerald caught his arm, and shook him, as if he would waken a dreamer. "Ajax! For Christ's sake, pull yourself together! After all, it was no more than a misunderstanding, which could not have occurred, had you known my Blessed Lady better. But you have done her no ill, beyond suspecting her of a crime she could not even have imagined."

Ajax forced his eyes from Gerald's. "Of course. Of course. You—are right." *I have done her no ill. God have mercy on me for my sin!*

"Of course," Gerald agreed, heartily, and slapped his back with relief, and winding his arm through his led him to the house. "If it were not that the matter so nearly touches me, I assure you you would not be so moved. So I shall hold you to your promise: we shall speak no more of it. A matter not spoken of is most easily forgotten."

"Yes," said Ajax. "Yes. Most easily forgotten."

"Exactly. After all, what Clarissa does not know cannot injure her, and I swear she shall hear no hint of the matter from me."

He drew Ajax to the great room, where young Ajax was sprawled before the fireplace, disposing his "soldiers." There were two score of them, puppets rudely carved by Elias, for the child's pleasure, and as the men entered, he looked up and explained his maneuvers seriously.

"These are the King's gentlemen, and this is Prince Rupert," he told them. "And on this side, is my Lord of Essex, leading the Parliament men."

"And doubtless," said Ajax quickly, forcing his tone to naturalness, "you will speedily obey Parliament's orders, and 'rescue our King from perfidious advisors, and return him to his Lords and Commons.'"

The boy looked from one man to the other, puzzled. "Does he want to be rescued?"

Gerald shook his head. "I fear not, poor Gentleman. I fear he will refuse rescue. He has said he will die before he yields to their 'impudent requests,' though he has most likely not considered the matter with as cold care as they have." He turned to Ajax. "Did you know Vane has gone to Scotland to effect a treaty with the Covenanters?"

"He's back. I thought you knew. I got the word as I left Jamestown. He succeeded. The turning point was his father's notes of a Council Meeting, where Strafford and Charles talked weightily of loosing the Irish Army on England."

"God! Not after the Ulster Massacre!"

"Certainly. And both Parliament and the Scots had small stomach for any repetition of it. So now the King has covenanted with Rome, and the Parliament with the Presbytery, and each faction is sworn to live in love and peace with its allies; and between the two, England whets her sword. I tell you, Gerald, there has been no such power loosed since Runnymede. If you had seen Pym and Hampden, sober gentlemen if ever there were such, and in the same ranks the London apprentices, each fighting the same battle, but each with his own weapons, you would understand."

"I knew there were bonfires on every hill when Strafford lost his head. And that Englishmen rushed around embracing all they saw, and crying 'His head is off!' That's a revolution in itself, for Englishmen to behave so strangely."

"Black Tom was a strange Englishman," Ajax said, and for a moment remembered the vintners' cellar, and the

angry murmur, more terrible than cries, "Black Tom Tyrant!" "We are not used to turncoats."

The boy on the hearth rose, and came to him slowly, and leaned against him. "Why did you leave home, Uncle Ajax? Were you given prop'ty, like my father?"

"Your father and I came for one reason, to make you free," Ajax said, his throat tight. He was thankful Gerald had left the room, and could not see his disturbance.

"But wasn't home free?" the boy persisted.

"Once. And please God, it will be again. But for a little, the King forgot. And when the people would have reminded him, he went into Parliament and demanded the lives of all who opposed his will. There were five gentlemen named Hampden and Pym and Hollis and Strode and Hasselrig, who had been very courageous, and they went out from Westminster into the city, and hundreds of people knew where they were, but no one would tell the King, and the Sheriffs would not use the warrants for their arrest. I think it was then most people realized for the first time that we had yielded our freedom, little by little, and that it would take many lives to buy it back again."

"But where you lived, it was free, wasn't it? In Buckinghamshire?"

"Even in Buckinghamshire, they understood. I had a letter from our old friend Master Milton, who told me that all the gentlemen freeholders of Buckingham rode to London in a great procession, vowing to live or die with the Parliament, and that as they went through the city they could scarcely move for the cheering crowds. This was no matter of the great against the lowly, nor the lowly against the great, but of men of one will and accord against those of another persuasion, of whatever rank. And God grant us a good issue, in His time."

"When it is over, I want to go back, to Stacys Holding."

"Do you?" Ajax exclaimed. He was amazed that the boy should have such tenderness for a place he had never seen,

and took him on his knee. The child's nearness ran through him, as the small body leaned trustfully back against him. He had loved Gerry more than he had believed he could love a child, but as Ajax smiled up into his eyes, his emotion choked him, so that he could not speak. *This is my son. God forgive me!* He said finally, "So you want to go to England, do you? Have you ever been to sea?"

"I've been in the barge to Jamestown."

"No, no. To sea. Really to sea. Where you can't see anything but waves and sky—"

"It sounds very lonely," Ajax demurred, but brightened immediately. "But there are mermaids, aren't there?"

"I have heard so," Ajax admitted cautiously, unwilling to rob his career of any possible advantage, "though I have never seen any myself."

"Why?"

"Perhaps they saw me first and swam away."

"Oh, no. They're ladies, aren't they? No lady would do that."

"God bless me, why not?"

"Because Mistress Rawlins said that ladies would love you," the boy answered unexpectedly.

Ajax was taken completely off guard. The face of Christopher Rawlins's gentle sister flashed before him, so demure no one could have suspected her of such notions. He said, "How did she come to say that to you?"

"Oh, she didn't say it to me. She said it to my mother."

Something beyond his will forced Ajax to ask, "And what did she answer?" The boy hesitated, and he pressed it, his voice harsh, "Tell me. The truth, mind."

A flicker of scorn lit the child's eyes, as if he had long since rejected the whimpering subterfuge of lies. But he hung his head, twisting at one of Ajax's buttons, and his reply was almost inaudible. "She said if a lady did love you, it would be to her great rue."

Ajax tumbled the boy off his lap almost roughly, and

began striding the length of the room. "She was right," he said suddenly, and stopped before the startled child. "Pray God, boy, that you will never—" he stopped. He had been on the point of saying, "be like me." He changed it quickly to, "love any lady as I do," and knelt, and took the boy's hands in his. "Tell me. Are you content to bear my name?"

The child flushed. "As well yours as another's, Uncle."

Ajax was amazed at the pang he felt at the answer. His pride pricked him to ask, "No better?"

The boy's face flamed, and Ajax felt an overwhelming pity, knowing suddenly the child was defenseless against his affection. After a while, he said, "I am content, if you are, Uncle."

"I am more than content. I am thankful it will be you who will be known as Ajax Stacy, long after I am forgotten. Some day, you will know how much that means. A man's name is so close a part of him he is very jealous who shall bear it." The boy looked up swiftly, with such radiance that Ajax's breath caught. "It's a pact between us, Ajax Stacy: that each of us will bear the other's name honorably, come what may, until we die."

Clarissa glided into the room so silently neither of them heard her. When he looked up and saw her there, Ajax wanted to kneel, to grovel, to beg her forgiveness. Only the boy's presence prevented his going to her, and telling her of his remorse and sorrow.

She said, "Have you been telling of your wanderings, brother? You must not lead my son into your footsteps, you know."

"God forbid." He spoke with such earnestness, she was astonished and showed her surprise, but it was evident her real attention was focused on the boy.

"My son, have you forgotten the time? I have awaited you this hour past."

Ajax saw the boy whiten, catching his lip in his teeth,

and said in a swift undertone, "Be lenient, Clarissa. I have awaited him longer than an hour."

"You mistake the issue, brother. There is a pattern of life at Feathergrant that was lacking at Stacys Holding." Under her raised brows her clear eyes swept him. It was as if she said, You bent me to your will for a night but I shall bend you for a lifetime. This is you—you, Ajax Stacy—your bone and blood and flesh—your very name—all, delivered into my hands. She spoke to the child with the same cold absolutism Ajax had noted earlier. "It grieves me you should forget your duty to me for the first person who comes seeking your attention. You may go, now."

The boy's head drooped, and he went from them, scuffing his toes, uncertain as a blind man.

All of Ajax's grief, all his hunger and his passion, were swept away before his son's misery. "Clarissa! Have you no pity?"

Clarissa's quick look might have said. Had you? Instead, she let the small pause grow, knowing that in it the man before her would see what she was seeing: the hall, the staircase, the great bed at Stacys Holding.

When at last he could bear it no longer, and took an uncertain step toward her, reaching out with groping hands, she did not move. She laughed, and impaled him as he stood, on the crystal spearhead of sound.

"I think this is a matter you must leave in my hands, brother," she said. "Even you must grant that when you left England you relinquished it to me."

IV

TAQUETUCK, SEASON of Falling Leaves, had yielded to Cohonk, Time of Wild Geese, and frost lay on Clarissa's flowers in the mornings, and Gerald and Ajax returned from their hunting with noses and ears nipped red as English holly.

The slaves had built themselves strong quarters after the tobacco harvest, daubing the chinks with mud, and even adding a chimney of broken and discarded bits of brick, from the chimneys of Feathergrant. They seemed happy enough, and were breeding at such a rate Gerald wondered, laughingly, how he would feed them. On sunny days, the pickaninnies seemed to crawl from every crack and crevice, to lie basking like plump little black lizards in the sun. He and Ajax grinned and waved to them in passing, and their teeth flashed sun-bright in return.

Gerald said, "Has Master Rawlins come yet?" and their chorused, "No, Marst', nah yet," was gay as the chirping of crickets.

"Tell Hannibal we brought down a fine buck in the East woods," Gerald said. "The boys must skin and bring it in before sundown, mind. Last time, they forgot and we had no more than skull and horns for our pains," he told Ajax. "It takes about two hours for the wild dogs to polish the bones clean as a chessman. They're half wolves, and they come from nowhere for carrion, beast or human."

"At least," Ajax said, "you can bury your dead. With us, the ground freezes solid, and we dare not thaw it with fire, because of the savages." His lips tightened with the memory of Gerry's burial, and he saw again the shadowy figures of strangers guarding from observation the lonely little grave. "We chip out what we can, of course, but it seldom suffices

against the wild beasts. Another reason I prefer the sea. It buries its own dead."

They walked around to the river side of the house, and Gerald said, "You haven't seen Clarissa's sundial, have you? She hasn't shown you? It will be complete for Christmas."

He pointed to a hundred or so small box trees, untrimmed and scattered with no sense or pattern, his eyes twinkling at Ajax's expression.

"But what is it?" Ajax said at last, "You said a sundial, but it looks to me like nothing so much as a snap-hazard young forest, and slightly moth-eaten, at that."

"Impossible!" Gerald cried in mock dismay. "Clarissa said as much, only yesterday. Indeed, she ordered it all rooted up, when I had scarcely had it put in, and if Elias had not rushed to warn me, the entire project would be ashes by now. Can it be you don't discern a pattern there, Ajax?"

"Even without Clarissa to back my opinion, it is the strangest looking sundial I ever saw. God grant the sun never follows it!"

"The sun has followed it," Gerald said, abruptly serious, "from the first hour I saw my Blessed Lady."

Ajax did not answer, and they went into the house to find Clarissa surveying the long-frame table critically. It had been spread before the fire, and its bright dowlas tablecloth and napkins, shining pewter plates and horn cups for syllabub and lignum vitae, glowed hospitably, but Clarissa's pretty brow puckered as she raised her eyes.

"Gerald has promised me a damask cloth for Christmas," she said, "and a set of silver goblets. But for the tankard you gave him, and the porringer you lately had made for your namesake, we have no silver at all, though you may find it difficult to believe." She paused, and then asked the question she could no longer control. "Do the ladies in the Bay have very fine services?"

Ajax laughed at her expression. *Even in a wilderness, he thought, a woman is a woman!*

Clarissa exclaimed, "I cannot imagine what you are laughing at! Surely, it is no cause for scoffing that a woman wishes her husband well thought of!"

"Her husband! God's final Name, Clarissa, what has a silver goblet to do with my reputation?"

"Much, had you the wit to know it," Clarissa answered composedly. "Else why would I fret as I have to acquire it? Surely, you cannot imagine that I am so foolish as to prefer the taste of Madeira from one cup over another, nor to care whether my turkey is served on pewter or silver!"

"Turkey!" Gerald cried, "Now, it is plates, it seems!"

"And why not?" demanded Clarissa. "What good is it to open a new acre for tobacco, and purchase an extra slave, and fight flea beetles and black shank and hornworm until you could wish to be as dead as the crop, if all it adds up to is opening yet another acre, and purchasing yet another slave, and fighting further pests, next year?" She flashed to Ajax. "I asked you a question, brother, and I shall be grateful for an answer. I'll wager the ladies of the Commonwealth do not content themselves with pewter, though the soil is stiff as Pharaoh's corpse, I'm told."

Ajax said, "No matter what I answer, it appears I shall injure one or the other of you."

"I ask only the truth," Clarissa assured him, folding her hands on her stomach.

"The truth is that I do not rightly remember. I never gave the matter great attention. I believe that some ladies, such as Mistress Winthrop, have gone to considerable pains to import pieces of value. I know that Governor Winthrop even owns a silver fork. And Mistress Hutchinson's husband, being an importer, has given her some fine things, also. But for the most part, I think the ladies of one Colony have as fine possessions as those of the other, as far as household goods are concerned, though Master Dudley was censured for too great adornment of his house, having used a considerable quantity of overornamented wainscoting."

"You see?" Clarissa cried. "I've said from the first, cedar board and whitewashed clay lacked elegance!"

"But your raiment is much finer," Ajax said quickly. "They have no metal brocade nor lace nor jewels nor gewgaws. But that is for religion's sake, not for lack of taste nor reasons of poverty, for many have large means."

"But silver—they have plenty of silver, I'll be bound."

Ajax curbed a smile. "You asked the truth, Clarissa, and the truth is I scarcely know one from the other, whether silver or pewter."

Clarissa tossed her head. "You and Gerald!" she exclaimed, but had no opportunity to say what she thought of them, because of the arrival of her guests.

Amy Rawlins was tall, with soft brown hair and eyes, and the fine red color sprung from the dampness of the English climate. She had been born after her brother's emigration, and bore none of the marks of the poverty that had seared his youth, though, as Clarissa had said, no one could mistake her for gentry. "But in the wilderness," Clarissa had confided to Ajax, "she does well enough."

As a matter of fact, she did better than "well enough." Her strong body and common sense had already changed her brother's place from a skeleton plantation, where he earned a haphazard living, and was contented to rest once he had taken up enough ground and got enough slaves to ensure himself a voice in government and a certain respect from his neighbors, to a model estate having, oddly enough, a misleading air of gentility. She was putting into practice all the good advice he had given Gerald, and before anyone realized what was happening, the name Christopher Rawlins would be one to reckon with.

She crossed to Ajax quietly enough, but there was a shyness under her look that made him recall what she had said of him. He colored, feeling Clarissa watching them both, and marveled how short a time it was since he and Amy Rawlins, if in England, would have bedded together before

the evening was out. Here, with his whole viewpoint shifted, such a possibility seemed remote as another lifetime.

She said, "You will never imagine how we came, Master Stacy," and flashed a smile at her brother. "Don't tell him. Make him guess!"

"Horseback," said Ajax. She shook her head. "By barge?" "No."

"Not afoot, surely?" He struck his forehead, in mock despair, and she laughed gaily as a child at his discomfiture. "I have it! You flew—and I should have said it first," and he bowed as low as he would have at Stacys Holding, "since doubtless all angels travel so!"

She did not answer, and as the color swept up her face, he regretted his gallantry.

Clarissa said, "You mustn't mind our brother. He is given to a lightness with all ladies, and woe to us if we credit him!" Her eyes met his almost contemptuously.

"How did you come?" he asked gently, "I was only covering all means I could imagine."

"We came by canoe, and a prettier craft you never saw!"

"You have not seen one of my ships."

"No matter. It cannot rival mine! When we have eaten, you must come down and see it. It is not half the length of this room, and I can manage it all myself."

"She can and she does," Rawlins said. "She would not let me touch a paddle."

"Why should I? It's mine, isn't it?"

"There you have it!" Rawlins said proudly, "as jealous a lass as ever came out of Lincolnshire!"

Again the quick blood swept to her temples, and Clarissa frowned, as she turned to the children, come to say good night.

She must be mad to imagine— But she watched Ajax more closely, nevertheless, hiding her observation under a shower of kisses for the baby.

The older boy went at once to Rawlins. "Have you been

to Jamestown? Have you news? My array is ready for battle, but my Uncle Ajax says I must know how to move before I dispose the horse and foot."

"That is good advice for any general," Rawlins agreed soberly. "Yes, I have news. *The Flying Hind* came in yesterday. The Queen is returned from visiting the Princess of Orange, and has brought with her more arms than free men will greet pleasantly from a foreign power." He glanced about. "And there is more to it. Lord Fairfax has been thrown back to West Riding. It is a black hour for the free people of England."

"Hush, Chris!" Amy cried, "You know he should not be so forthright. Should he, Master Stacy?"

Ajax started. His mind had been far away. The Princess of Orange—Mary, Princess Royal—the little girl who had started all the trouble. She was married, now. She had been married when she was nine years old, a pawn in the great game of nations.

Fortunately, Rawlins had filled the pause by saying, "It's an hour to be forthright, Amy. John Hampden's dead, on Chalgrove field."

"Hampden!" Ajax cried. He was thoroughly aroused now. "You're right. It's no time for hedging, with him dead of it."

"But Governor Berkeley insists we all remain loyal to the King," Amy protested.

"We are loyal to the King, but not to the King's follies," Rawlins said. "He would best empty his head of notions, if he would save it."

"Chris!"

She looked so distressed that Ajax intervened. "Sir William is an excellent gentleman, but a trifle shortsighted. I have heard nothing but complaints of his governing since I came, it seems. His latest refusal to protect you against the savages—"

Clarissa laughed. "There are more shortsighted than the governor in that," she said. "It's less than a year since our

planters forced the Assembly to make laws prohibiting peace with the Indians."

"We cannot make peace with them," Gerald explained. "The moment we do, we believe in it, and settle down. And they use the advantage to stage a massacre."

Ajax smiled. "So there you have it. No matter how we add the account, it seems the Governor is out of step."

"What can we do about it?" Rawlins demanded. "They send us one after another from England, instead of letting us choose one of our own men."

"Two of them have clapped us under martial law," Gerald added. "We were not as forehanded as you of the Massachusetts. We left our Charter in England, and the moment it became an inconvenience, it disappeared. I understand you were cleverer in New England."

"The Bay settlers brought theirs over with them, I believe. They have it under lock and key, beyond tampering." He was smiling to himself at Gerald's unconscious "us" and "our."

"I wish we'd looked ahead, as they did," Rawlins said. "We'll need more than a Charter to weather the storm that's brewing, I'm afraid."

"I'm more troubled about Hampden than I can say," Ajax admitted. "One after another is going—"

"But one after another is rising!" Rawlins countered. He turned quickly to the boy on the hearth. "Here's a name for you, if you lack leaders. Call one the Ironside."

"The Ironside!" Gerald exclaimed, "He's that friend of Vane's and Milton's, Ajax. What was his name? You know, the one built like a battering ram, with a square red face and a voice like thunder and lightning shaken together."

"I remember. But he's no newcomer. He's been in Parliament a dozen years, and his father before him. He's a relative of Hampden's, as a matter of fact. One of the great Hinchinbrook family—"

"Well, he's raised himself a regiment now," Rawlins told

them. "They say they all charge into battle singing psalms at the top of their voices." He turned to the boy, maneuvering his puppets on the wool-work rug. "If you would be really farsighted, my lad, you'll name one of your leaders Oliver Cromwell."

V

AJAX HAD intended to return to the Bay before Christmas, but he could not leave Feathergrant with such weight upon his spirit. Not only had he been able to force from Gerald no promise about his plan for Ajax, but he had been able neither to make nor find an opening to plead forgiveness from Clarissa.

At night, after he went to bed, he lay awake, planning, living whole scenes when the eloquent words flowed from his full heart, telling her everything, pleading, overcoming her hatred, so justly sprung from his cruelty to her. At such times, his fisted hands clenched so that the nails bit the palms, and he could see there, next day, the stigmata of his suffering. What she must have endured in the months following the night at Stacys Holding he could only guess, but his love for her and his remorse made his reflected anguish hell. For the rest—what she might feel for Gerald—he did not allow himself to consider. With all his will, he put out of his mind the innuendoes of her looks or words. Gerald adored Clarissa so completely that out of his love there must have been born in her some tenderness, some affection. Ajax told himself that, fighting his own passion, fed by the invitation of her presence.

Late in November, no longer able to delay decision, he sent his ship home, bidding the mate stop at New Amsterdam, for a cargo of furs.

In Massachusetts, Christmas Day was supposed to be like all others, lest its observation should be marred by un-Puritanic routs and mummary, but Ajax knew well there were few who did not feel within themselves the glow of the blessed season, and recall, however secretly, the ancient English rites and customs. On such a day, by tacit consent,

families drew near together, and though their lips might not recall the reason, there glowed in eyes and voices the reflection of the eternal Miracle. So he sent his crew home, bidding them return for him in March, and relaxed into the routine of Feathergrant.

In spite of the ruling of the Roundhead Parliament that Christmas was to be as other days, in that, at least, Governor Berkeley's will ruled, for Virginia had no qualms about celebrating the Feast in the traditional English manner. Many of the settlers had left home, as had Gerald, under Laud's ban, and many more, like Rawlins, reflected a system gladly left behind, but they clung to all they had loved in the old country and, in so far as possible, reconstructed it in the new. On every plantation, there would be feasting, merriment, and dancing, and the great stocks of wines and spirits, brought from the ends of the earth, prophesied good cheer. For a week past, every pickaninny on the plantation had been gathering greens. Some could scarcely stagger under their loads, but their eyes were bright and their mouths already open for the sugarplum reward Clarissa granted.

Ajax, passing the storage pit, saw her selecting great mounds of oysters each over a foot in length, and crabs so huge four men could feed from one. The women slaves were plucking canvasbacks and widgeons, and two turkeys, each over forty pounds in weight, hung on either side the back door. She said, as he paused:

"You see we shall not stint ourselves, that we have another mouth to feed," and he marveled anew at the casual ease she assumed like a garment in the presence of servants or guests. For himself, he never saw her without a quickening of his heart. Did she guess it? Did she know the true reason for the apparent brusqueness that tinged his manner toward her?

He said now, "I'm looking for my namesake," and saw her eyes, immediately guarded. "We're going to fetch the Yule Log shortly," he added.

Clarissa's mouth tightened. Ajax had not realized before

how set it had become. In the winter sunlight, he discovered small lines about it. Yet she was still in her twenties, and her figure slender as a girl's, for all she had borne two sons.

She said, "But you can't want that baby—"

"Oh, come, now. Every male on the place will go. You know that."

"Neither of my sons will," Clarissa smiled. "They are not yet old enough."

"Gerald may not be, but—"

"Ajax will not go without his brother," Clarissa said. "I fear you favor your namesake too greatly."

She looked back at her supplies as if the matter were ended, and again her absolutism stung Ajax. "Clarissa," he exclaimed, "After all, it's Christmas, and the boy's been looking forward to it."

"He is not going. And if he has been looking forward to it, the more pity. Certainly, I said nothing to raise his hopes."

"Gerald did—"

"Gerald should have consulted me," Clarissa said, unruffled. "He should know by now that I must decide for Ajax." Ajax's eyes flicked the blacks. *Surely*, he thought, *they must realize she makes no such rule for the baby. They must wonder why—or guess—* But if they did, they gave no sign of it, and after a moment Clarissa glanced up, her forehead furrowed with concentration and annoyance. "Please, brother, do not press the matter. He would only be in the way. He is not a man, as you seem to imagine, and must not be endangered by men's pursuits."

Ajax's breath caught. Had Gerald told her of his plan for the boy, and was this her answer?

He turned sharply, and sought his brother, superintending the decoration of the log.

"Here you are!" Gerald cried. His face was red, and his eyes sparkling. "Is the nog prepared? God's final Name, Ajax, it's grand, having you here! Where's the boy?"

"Clarissa has forbidden his coming," Ajax answered, and some of his bitterness tinged his tone.

"Forbidden—" Gerald's face sobered, and his hands fell to his sides. "But he should ride in on the log. Surely, Clarissa must know—"

"She knows only that Gerald is too young, and has made a rule Ajax shall do nothing without the baby. Gerald, have you spoken to Clarissa of my desire for Ajax?"

"Please," Gerald exclaimed, and his tone was so much like Clarissa's Ajax stared. "Not now. After all—it's Christmas."

"It's been weeks since I asked you."

"And I told you then what I knew her answer would be. I thought you would realize, after you had observed—"

"I realize—many things," Ajax curbed his rising anger. "But as you say, it's Christmas. Gerald—I'll wait with Clarissa and the boys, while the log's brought in."

"You mean you won't— But, good God, Ajax, you're part of the ceremony! The greatest part. It's been years since we celebrated Christmas together."

"I know. And I'd looked forward to it as much as you. But I doubt it meant as much to either of us as it did to the boy." He put his hand on Gerald's shoulder. "If I stay it will be easier for him. Just think of that and you won't be so disappointed."

Gerald grunted something, and Ajax returned to the house. Clarissa and her sons were standing before the hearth, waiting for the log. When she saw Ajax, her brows rose inquiringly.

"I am waiting with you and the boys," he said, "So you'll have three men with you, to welcome Christmas."

Clarissa did not answer, but when he put his hand on Ajax's shoulder her eyes clouded, and she left the room quickly, taking the baby with her.

He sat down and drew Ajax to him. "Tell me," he said, "Is your mother always as she has been since my coming?"

Ajax looked up in his eyes. "My father says she is as changeless as the stars," he repeated soberly.

And as cold, Ajax thought, but the swift, searing memory of the night at Stacys Holding, never far from his thoughts, swept him. *I have made her as she is. It is my fault, my responsibility.*

The boy said, "Why did you return? I would not have returned, had I been allowed to go."

"I returned to be with you," Ajax told him. "I thought you would be happier with another man to keep you company. Sometimes, I feel quite responsible for your happiness."

Clarissa had entered, her smooth, silent tread bringing her to their side, unobserved. "Possibly," she said, "you would both be happier were that not so. Has that never occurred to you, brother?"

The shouts of the log-bearers prevented his answering, and in the instant, Clarissa's manner changed. She laughed aloud, joyous as a girl, and beckoned the house slaves, crowding the back door.

"Come in! Come in, and welcome Christmas!"

There was a resounding knock on the front door. The cry, "Way for Christmas!" rang through the house.

Ajax caught his namesake's hand, but Clarissa was swifter. As the front door burst open, she swung young Gerald shoulder-high, seating him astride the log. He rode triumphantly into the hall, the slaves singing and shouting around him. Gerald, bringing up the rear, shouting "Was-sail!" with all his lusty might, did not realize what had happened until he saw the two Ajaxes, standing a little apart, their white strained faces so alike the shock smote the glad cry from his lips.

He said, "Clarissa—you shouldn't—you know, the eldest son—"

"Oh, la," laughed Clarissa, "Ajax is too heavy! Why in a year or two, he'll be going to help you fetch it," and she

caught up her petticoat, and ran to pour the first cup of the nog upon the log, in libation.

Gerald raised the second cup high. "Christmas!" he cried, but though the blacks and whites drank the toast together, and even little Gerald downed a thimbleful, something of its joy was gone for all of them.

VI

GERALD AWAKENED early Christmas morning. It was not the sound of the slaves, singing with their jungle-begotten rhythm and plaintiveness, which contrived to give the oldest English carol a new sound, nor yet the crisp smell of maize pone and hog fat, sifting through the window cracks, from the cookhouse, but rather a sense of portent, penetrating his dreams and recalling him to last night's heaviness.

With all their outward gaiety, with all their feasting and drinking, they had not been able to banish the shadow that had entered with the Yule log, and Clarissa's interference. He thought he knew why she was acting as she was. Many women adored their youngest children, and Ajax's evident preference for the older boy had aggravated her jealousy for the baby. In his heart, he supposed it was natural enough for Clarissa to love Gerald best. The older boy's resemblance to his uncle, so evident in his very birth hour, had grown even more marked with the years. But the baby was the image of himself, and Clarissa, God love her, adored him for his resemblance to her beloved husband.

I certainly cannot blame her for that, Gerald thought. *I wish Ajax would not make such an issue of it. It only makes it the more obvious.*

He pulled back the bed curtains, and padded heavily across the floor. The fire had died down in the night, and it was too early for Elias to have rebuilt it. He flung a log on the iron dogs himself, pulling them straight so that the brass heads snarled toward the room. Clarissa was particular about such matters. But his well-meant pottering awakened her. She said crossly:

"Must you rouse the entire household with this peep-o'-day brawling?"

He grunted, then looked at her. She was propped on an elbow, peering sleepily at him around the bed curtains. Her white skin and pale hair against the fine scarlet cloth were incredibly lovely. He realized, as he had a hundred times before, that Clarissa was never so beautiful as when she was cross. He went to her, and thrust back the bedclothes, and kissed her white body in a dozen places.

"Merry Christmas, my sweet."

She closed her eyes, frowning. She had been dreaming of Ajax, and had small appetite for her husband's lovemaking.

Gerald rose, his ill mood returning, and dragged the curtains back into place, forcing a barrier between Clarissa and his desire. She had rebuffed him, and the black mood of yesterday returned.

Clarissa and Ajax. It was unreasonable, beastly, of them to hate each other, as obviously they did. Above all, it was unkind of them to intrude their dislike upon his love for them.

I should have thought, for my sake, they could have concealed their true feelings. And then, It's childish of them. Ajax dislikes her, doubtless, because he thinks he's injured her, and it makes him feel guilty. And she senses his coldness, and dislikes him in turn. And for an unguarded moment, he wished that Ajax had returned with his ship.

He closed the door meticulously, as if to imprison Clarissa and her captiousness, and started down the hall. A sudden sound stopped him.

Young Ajax was at the top of the stairs. He held something in his hand and was waving it wildly. His eyes shone and his cheeks were pink. He knew his mother well enough to make no sound, but as he descended, his whole demeanor shouted. He thrust the paper into his father's hand.

"Read it," he whispered. "I've been waiting hours 'n' hours."

"Come in by the fire," Gerald said, and led him to the great room, pulling his night rail closer. "You'll die of an ague."

He poked the fire and slumped in a chair, the child against his breast.

Then he looked at the paper he held. "God's final Name!" he cried, "Where did you come by this? Do you know what it is?"

"Uncle Ajax gave it to me last night, to sleep on," the boy said. "He said it was my Chris'mas gift and you'd tell me all about it in the morning."

Gerald rose, tumbling the child to the chair, running his hand through his hair. After all, he thought, Stacys Holding was not entailed. And even if it had been, the boy would have inherited it, if Ajax did not marry himself. But to have him have it now—What would Clarissa say? Why had Ajax done such a mad thing? For a moment, he hesitated, whether he should consult Clarissa before telling the boy, but his loyalty to Ajax forbade it. Only in one detail would he deviate from Ajax's plan.

He said, "Go tell your uncle I have read it, and I say he is to tell you himself. There are—certain things between you and him where even I have no right to interfere."

"May I go now? May I ask now?"

"Yes," said Gerald, "Yes. Go now."

He saw the boy start upstairs, then opened the door and went in to Clarissa. She sat up in bed and thrust her dishevelled head between the bed curtains.

"Do not trouble yourself with any effort at quietness," she said. "I assure you, I am quite awake, now."

"I am not trying to be quiet. There is a matter more urgent than sleep, Clarissa. Ajax has given his namesake Stacys Holding."

For a moment Gerald thought Clarissa would faint. She put her hand to her throat, and her face was corpselike.

"Stacys Holding!" she whispered. She could hardly form the words. "You mean, that—that—"

"I mean that young Ajax is the legal owner of Stacys

Holding. The deed was duly drawn and signed when Ajax went to Jamestown, last month, to see his ship off."

Clarissa sank back in the bed. After a long time, she said falteringly, "After all, it may be worth nothing. With matters as they are in England—"

Gerald shrugged.

"Nothing has ever been proven against Ajax," he told her. "Even the matter of his flight was covered over by Vane and Lord Brook, so finally no one was the wiser. No matter which party wins, Stacys Holding is as safe as any seat in England." He stared at her, frowning, puzzled. "Why do you hate Ajax so?"

"If" she laughed nervously, summoning all her powers to shield the moment. "If Hate Ajax? Don't be ridiculous! It is he, who— Oh, Gerald, I am so sorry, my dear. So bitterly sorry. I have hoped, I have prayed, you would not notice it. But Ajax hates *me*. I—I think he is jealous. I think he resents your loving me so greatly. Oh, yes, he does!" She put her hand quickly over his mouth, "It shows in everything he does. He has even tried to separate my first-born son from me. Why do you think he has done this? Surely, you do not think it is from any great generosity for the boy, do you? How could it be? What good would a bit of paper like that do the child—for years and years? Even if the war were over tomorrow—if it were over now, while we speak—he could not go over and occupy that great house alone, without guidance or companionship. Don't you see? The only reason he's done this, the only reason he could possibly have had, was to alienate the boy from me, to make him even more insubordinate, to make him feel his father's family is rich and powerful, able to give him splendid presents, while I—I am just nothing!"

She wound her arms around Gerald's neck, and began sobbing wildly.

He soothed her frantically, smoothing her hair, and kiss-

ing her lids and throat and forehead. "Clarissa, my darling! Don't! You don't understand Ajax! He's not like that— If you knew him better—"

"I know him better than you may ever imagine!" she exclaimed, and her breath caught hysterically. "I know him far better than I wish I did!"

"Nonsense, sweetheart! Here—here, dry your lovely eyes—and come see my surprise for you."

He wiped her eyes on his silk kerchief, as if she had been a child, and slipped her small fur moccasins on her feet, and led her to the window. She still sobbed shudderingly against his shoulder, but for the most part, her violence was spent.

"Look," he said, and pointed to the second terrace.

In the early morning sunlight, a perfect dial of clipped box cast its shadow on the hour of seven. Around the edge, clipped evergreens were planted, forming initials, circling the figures.

CLARISSA—LOVE—

Gerald said, his lips against her hair, "You see, my darling, that you and love encompass all the hours of my life, awake or sleeping."

"Thank you," she said. Her voice was muffled, and she had bowed her head to hide the bitter rebellion roused by his words.

He felt her cheek against his breast, heard her hushed voice, and thought how deeply moved she was.

"My darling," he said, "My Blessed Lady."

Oh, God, she thought, If it had been Ajax— All the days of all my years, of all eternity, could not suffice!

But she knew that Ajax would never have done this. His power over her lay in his refusal to admit her power over him, in the struggle between them, each fighting to force the other to acknowledgment of that power.

She said suddenly, "Gerald— There is no possibility of Ajax's changing his mind?"

"No. It is a clear deed, with only one stipulation."

"And that?" said Clarissa. She was breathless. Her eyes shone.

"A simple one. He wants some word in the boy's upbringing. That is natural and easy enough, certainly." He looked at her covertly.

But Clarissa did not demur. She was no longer listening. She had begun to dress, exquisitely, with great precision, humming a little to herself.

VII

AJAX OPENED his eyes, and saw the boy standing by his bed, the deed to Stacys Holding clasped in his small, shaking hands. His teeth were chattering with cold and excitement, but he made no sound until Ajax's eyes met his. Then:

"Oh!" The syllable exploded, as if he no longer had strength to control it. "Oh, I'm glad you woke up!"

Ajax did not tell him it would have been impossible to sleep with his dreams stirred to tumult by the tempestuous eagerness beside his bed. He yawned, and smiled, instead, and raised the coverings.

"You'd best hop in here before you fall ill," he said, and nested the boy beside him, his arms shaking as he covered him. *My son—my son, and Clarissa's.* When he could trust his voice, he said, "And are you content with your Christmas gift?"

"Ummm. What is it, Uncle Ajax?"

"What is it? Bless me, don't you know? Do you mean to tell me that lazy good-for-nothing brother of mine is still sleeping?"

"No. He's all dressed. I guess he's eaten all the pone by now."

"Then out with you, and ask him!"

"He says you'll tell me," the child's lips trembled, "and you say, he'll tell me, and—"

"Oh, he saw it then?"

"Yes, but he said it was between you and me, and—"

"He did?" Ajax's heart rose. It was generous of Gerald. But more, far more: it meant that Gerald agreed that he could have a word in his son's upbringing. "That's all I wanted to know. This is the deed to Stacys Holding."

"The—the—what?"

Ajax laughed softly, and hugged the boy. "This means, Ajax Stacy, that from this hour you own Stacys Holding, exactly as my brother owns Feathergrant. If your mother, or your father, or Gerald goes there, it will be as your guest."

"And if you go there?"

"That includes me, also. You are its master, though I shall hope to advise you in its management. For one thing, I trust you will retain the staff?" He asked it seriously, though his eyes twinkled at the idea of Dolly Wimple considering herself "discharged" by this young sprig.

"Oh, we Stacys must never let our slaves go," the boy assured him. "They want to stay in their home, too, you know. We may get more, but we must keep the ones we have. That is why we are so careful s'lecting them. We must keep them, even when they're old, and can't work, or anything."

"I understand," Ajax said. "But the case is a trifle different at Stacys Holding. There aren't any slaves there. In fact there are very few blacks in England at all, in comparison. Your servants at Stacys Holding are English, just as you are."

"Oh! Indent'd, like the mason and carpenter Gov'nor Berkeley has?"

"No. They are free, quite free. But they must work, just as I do, in order to get food to eat."

"Oh, haven't you enough to eat? We have a lot to eat. I'm sure that my mother would give you all you wanted forever, if you ask her, and then you won't have to work, and—"

"Thanks," said Ajax shortly, "I like work." He rose, and began to dress quickly. The boy's assumption that everything within the house, the warmth, the cheer, even the food they ate, was Clarissa's, had piqued him, unreasonably. He went back to the boy, and said gently, "You will like work, too, Ajax. You will learn about a ship, and go to Master Harvard's College, and learn to work with your head as well as your hands, and some day, you will go to Oxford, as the

Stacy men always have. But, bless me, you'll never do anything, if you don't get up and dress and start!"

The child tumbled from bed, laughing, and Ajax watched him thoughtfully. He was a beautiful boy by any standard, with his straight, sturdy body, and clear eyes. All Clarissa's deviling had served only to make him sober, mature beyond his years. It had not affected his pride, nor his honesty.

Ajax thought, *She must love him, herself. She can't help it. It is only that she sees me in him, and cannot let him alone because of that. It is really my fault—and only mine. She is not to blame.* But he knew that when she started nagging the child again, all his tenderness would fade before his resentment against her treatment of his son.

The boy ran into the hall as he left his own room, and caught his hand, and started downstairs with him, waving the deed wildly. When he saw Clarissa, in the great room, before the fire, he broke from Ajax, and flung himself on her.

"Mother!" he cried, "Will you visit me at Stacys Holding? Will you?"

Clarissa's face hardened. *It has begun, she thought. No matter what happens now, I shall never be mistress there.* And all her old desire for the place swept her bitterly. *Visit!* she thought. *Visit—my own son—visit Ajax's bastard!*

Gerald was answering for her. He made a low and courtly bow. "Your mother and I shall be delighted," he said, "though I fear we shall have to postpone the pleasure for some time to come."

"Oh, yes," the child agreed instantly. "I must learn about boats first, and go to Master Harvard's College, and then to Oxford!"

Clarissa gasped, and Gerald laughed, a trifle uneasily. "You don't say so!" he cuffed the boy's ears playfully. "And whose son are you, pray? Your Uncle Ajax's or mine?"

He was too intent on the boy to see the quick, involuntary glance that passed between Ajax and Clarissa.

The child was saying, "I—I guess I must be yours, or I'd call you Uncle, and Uncle Ajax, Father."

"Exactly," said Gerald, "That's the way I figure it, too," and he winked over the child's head at Clarissa.

Clarissa said quietly, "And now that matter is settled, let us hear no further nonsense about boats and colleges. You are still a child, do you understand? And for some years to come, it is your mother's duty and privilege to assign you such tasks as she sees fitting."

"But Uncle Ajax said—"

"We will not speak further of it," Clarissa said, and glanced around quickly. "Where is your brother? Have you no thought for him, this Christmas morning? Go and fetch him, and then bid Blanche bring the victuals."

Ajax said, "I hope you will agree, as Gerald has, to my small condition, Clarissa. It is no more than natural that I should want some word in training Ajax for his inheritance."

"Inheritance!" Clarissa exclaimed. "If it were that— But you know it is not. It is no more than a—a bribe—to wean him from me!"

"He is overage for weaning," Ajax said. "It is time he had a man's influence."

"And what of Gerald? Do you think he has no word—"

"Gerald has already agreed. He saw the deed, with the stipulation, before I told the boy of its significance."

"Gerald!" The word was heartbroken. Gerald put out a quick hand and drew her to him.

"Clarissa," he said, "It is true I saw it. You knew that, I thought." His eyes pleaded with Ajax. "I am sure," he said slowly, "that you can trust Ajax to ask nothing that will not be for the boy's good—or that will cause you pain."

Ajax said quickly, "When I leave, I shall wish to take him with me, on the voyage."

Clarissa was too startled to answer. She had not expected such boldness, even from this man whose one purpose seemed

to be to humiliate her. Gerald turned to her, as if asking her agreement, but Ajax persisted.

"You understand exactly what it would involve, Gerald. It is clearly a matter for men to decide, soberly and reasonably, without a woman's sentiment or softness." He met Clarissa's eyes. They were cold, hard. She was thinking, *Soft. Before God, he shall see how soft I am.* He said slowly, "I am sure that in the end Clarissa will have the good sense to agree."

Gerald said relievedly, "And if she agrees, I certainly shall not object."

Clarissa swept them a small curtsy. "Thank you, husband," she said. "It is generous of you to consider me even in a matter touching me so lightly as the welfare of my son." She left the room, head high.

Gerald said, "What in God's Name is wrong between you and Clarissa?"

"Wrong?" Ajax echoed. He began walking about, trusting to cloak his agitation with action. "What could be wrong? You know that since my coming I have not spoken a dozen sentences to her save in your presence."

Gerald ran his hand through his hair in the old gesture of helpless bewilderment. "Nevertheless, there's something wrong. The way she looks at you—"

Good God, Ajax thought, *the way she looks at me*—and recalled Clarissa's long, amorous glances, riddled through with stabbing hate. He said, "Nonsense. She's probably jealous of your affection for me. It's hard for a woman to understand such matters. Women are odd, anyway!" he ended with a burst of feeling.

"Clarissa, jealous? What folly! That proves you do not understand her. She is incapable of jealousy. I tell you, she is a saint, pure gold without any dross. She has none of the flame or sultriness I always believed a part of love. She is like a clear white light, even in her love for me, lacking all murkiness or passion." He stopped, before the look in

Ajax's eyes. "What are you thinking?" he demanded petulantly.

"Nothing," Ajax said. "Nothing." He was thinking of Clarissa, in his arms, crying out in her triumphant yielding. Clarissa, who, her husband said, was passionless. He said quickly, "I can well believe Clarissa is not jealous. What is more, I believe from my heart she is the ideal mistress for Feathergrant. Let so much rest at that. But for the rest, even you must grant the boy is not happy."

"He adores Clarissa. You must realize that."

"Possibly. That may be the core of it. It is hard to worship a deity requiring perpetual propitiation."

"But I tell you it is her love for him that makes her require perfection."

"No matter what the cause," Ajax blurted, coming to a standstill before Gerald, "I tell you she is driving the boy mad. Good God, have you forgotten your own childhood? We were healthy young animals, not penitents, given to self-flagellation!"

Gerald smiled, but banished the smile sternly. "Certainly I recall our youth. But I also recognize the pass to which it has brought us."

"No one grants more readily than I that we lost much through our excesses. But God works in a mysterious way—" he stopped, astonished, at Gerald's look, half-quizzical, half-mocking, altogether reminiscent of the "degeneracy" he claimed to deplore. So. Gerald's straitness was no more than an echo of Clarissa. Clarissa had been working on Gerald, also, shaping him to her pattern. He said, "We shall leave it at that. For the rest: will you let me take the boy?"

Neither of them realized Clarissa had re-entered. She crossed to Gerald now, and slipped her hand through his arm, allowing it to tremble enough to remind him of her womanly dependence on him. She said softly, to Ajax:

"Let us put aside our differences, brother, in respect for the day. After all, you must not think too hardly of me,

if I would save my son from such disgrace and hardship as you and Gerald have too clearly proven to be the fruit of folly. It is no more than natural that a mother should wish to protect her child. Isn't that so, husband?"

She said the word lingeringly, looking up into Gerald's face with flowerlike appeal. He nodded automatically. Ajax knew the nod was only an echo of Clarissa, without volition or conviction.

He said, "You could trust Ajax to me. I wish only his happiness."

"Happiness! I wonder if that is the sole end of life. Or even if it can be achieved, without discipline. Happiness, brother, is not pleasure. Oh, I know you think me over-severe. I can see it in your face. But I know my son. I recognize his heritage." She paused, her eyes meeting his levelly. "I know that pampering will ruin him, making him callous to the needs and hurt of others, caring only for self-indulgence at whatever cost—"

"He will not be pampered with me," Ajax cut in. "Puritans have small patience with pampering."

"Puritans!" Clarissa cried. "You cannot mean you would exile my son among separatist outcasts!"

There was an instant's pause. Then Ajax said quietly, "My son might well be proud to be accounted one of them."

Their eyes locked. Gerald looked from one to the other helplessly. He said at last, "Clarissa— If he went for a little—"

Clarissa moved away from him. Her face seemed to narrow, there was something serpentine in the drawn-back malignance of her look as she faced Ajax.

"You cannot take him. Do you understand? He is mine—mine—"

"No one is tearing him from you," Ajax said. "If you could separate yourself from the matter long enough to consider only his good—"

"As you are, of course!"

"As I am," he told her steadily. "You hate the Puritans—"

"No! I hate only— You should know what I hate!"

"Let us say, then, that you do not understand them," Ajax swept aside her innuendo. "You underestimate them—"

"Underestimate! How can one underestimate that ragtag and bobtail! Do you think I have not seen them hounded through the streets, so low even the ragamuffins were free to stone them—"

"And so meek, doubtless, they endured it—like their Master. Very well. You saw it. And so did I. We all saw those things, and to our shame never lifted a finger in their defense, until it was too late. But history is a sure leveler, Clarissa. All that you know of New England is that the soil is 'stiff as Pharaoh's corpse.' I know more. I know it is a bitter land. A hard and bitter land. And one that does not yield, even to the mighty sea. It will breed a race like its own rocks. And then, God help you, Clarissa—you and your children of the black, soft soil—if you have not made friends with it. No wilderness remains a wilderness forever, and some day, the wise man, the safe man, the strong man, Clarissa, will be the man who respects alike the rocky coast of New England and Virginia's fertile loam." He paused under her scornful disbelief, and appealed to Gerald. "I am asking no new thing for Ajax. The Stacy men have always ventured over the world—"

"The world!" Clarissa interrupted. "That barren, fanatic-ridden neck of rock!" She turned suddenly to Gerald. "Where are the children?" she demanded. "Where is Blanche? You heard me tell Ajax to fetch them directly. Here is my whole meaning and objection. The moment the boy senses any authority behind his will, he flouts me. He is all ready to cast me aside for any newcomer who—"

"Clarissa, please—" Gerald went to the door, disappeared, calling "Ajax! Gerald! God's final Name, where are you?"

Clarissa went to Ajax. "You think I do not understand

what you want," she said tensely. "Believe me, if no one else understands you, I do. You will take the boy from me at any cost. Even though it kills him—"

"Kills him! Are you mad—?"

"Not so mad as you think me. Do you imagine I have not heard of their plagues and starvation and massacre? I tell you, the judgment of God is on them!"

"The strength of God is with them, rather. I tell *you*, I have seen no such strength as theirs in all of England!"

"Strength! It is all you care for, all you think of. It is your God. Strength! It has taken your heart, your very soul. Oh, do you think I do not know? All that you care for or understand is strength, that you may destroy and tread under foot everything that is exquisite and lovable, and—and pure—as I was." Her voice broke, and she turned from him.

His hand clasped her shoulder. He drew her close and held her away at one gesture. He searched her eyes, yielded naked to him at last, and knew all she was, all she had been and desired, knew her in her passion and her shame, roused to bitter hunger by him, and wed to Gerald, whose tender reverence could never satisfy her, deviling the child because he held incarnate in himself all her desire and frustration, all her passion and hate and fear.

"Good God," he said, "Good God, have mercy on us both!"

Her low short laugh mocked him. "We have wasted much time, you and I—*brother*," she said.

The meaning and intention of her words swept him with hunger and revulsion. Like a man caught between sleep and waking, he saw them as they had been, struggling in each other's arms, insatiable as if the prescience of the empty years forced them closer, closer, yet never close enough to kill desire.

He said sharply, "Clarissa— That is over, now. But—there is the boy."

She nodded, smiling with gentle mockery. "Yes. There is the boy."

"I—want him."

"You gave him to me," she laughed softly. "Even you cannot deny that." She drew very close to him, and looked up in his eyes. "Why did you flee from me, Ajax? Was I so very evil?"

"I didn't flee— There is no time now to tell you— Clarissa, it is the whole burden of my heart and life and soul. Good God, do you think I have not suffered? You must have known—"

"I knew only that—you went." Her hands fell, relaxed, as if at last she yielded all the hope that had filled the barren years. "Why did you take me, if you meant to go?"

"Because of what I believed you had done to Gerald. I was wrong, God knows, but—"

Her laugh cut his words. "Because of what *I* had done to Gerald! What *I*— Why—you—you fool! Nothing I could ever do would match what *you* did to him, that night!"

VIII

AJAX DID not move nor answer. He only stood quite still looking at her, and something in that look pierced her armor of selfishness and self-deception. For the first time, she saw them, herself and Ajax, as they really were. For the first time, she saw her strength as weakness, and what she had thought his weakness as his strength. Resentment rose in her, but it was powerless against the shame that held her. As if he were now speaking, she heard Ajax say, "You shall never say I forced you." In her heart, she knew it had been her own passion, and not Ajax, that had betrayed herself and Gerald. And in her heart, she knew her words had taken from Ajax the last pride that he had.

Gerald came in with the children. She flung a cloak of spurious gaiety around her, forgetting to rebuke young Ajax for his slowness, bidding them join her in this or that small bright ritual, twitting them on their slowness to follow her lead, until her hysterical pranks and laughter had pricked the household to a tumult of boisterous merrymaking. Only Ajax did not enter the festivities. Only Ajax, loving her more terribly because his love must fight both his reason and his will, knew how false her merriment was. At dusk, a dozen neighbors joined them, following Clarissa's lead in childish buffoonery, playing Blindman's Buff and Going to Jerusalem, traditional Christmas game since the Crusades. In the resultant scramble, she and Ajax were thrown a dozen times into each other's arms, and if her wildness muted then, no one knew it but themselves.

It was dawn before the feasting ended, and natural that as the last guest left, or was helped to bed at Feathergrant, Clarissa's spirits should ebb. *Thank God*, she thought, *I am so tired that I shall sleep. I must sleep, or go mad.* And then,

What if I do go mad? What if I die? It would be better for everyone. And she began to weep, with exhaustion, and shame, and self-pity.

She was grateful for the darkness within the bed curtains, as she lay struggling to control the tears she could not conquer, fighting to keep her shuddering, sob-twisted body rigid, so that Gerald might not awaken and question her. But at last, no longer able to endure her sorrow, Gerald turned over from pretended sleep, and put his arms around her gently, and she sobbed openly and wildly, against his breast.

When he had quieted her a little, he whispered, "What is it, my darling?" and smoothed the hair back from her sweaty forehead, and kissed her as if she had been a child. "Are you in pain, my Clarissa?"

"No," she sighed. "No. I am not in pain."

How could she tell him that she despised, hated—not Ajax, but herself? How could she tell him of the remorse that possessed her? *After all*, she thought, *it will pass with daylight. It is only that I am tired. What could I have done other than I have done? It was that—or dying like a coward, like Charlotte Ponsonby. And if I have wronged—anyone—I surely have paid for it with my own suffering.* And she recalled how Gerald had said, so long ago in London, "It would be hell for you at Stacy's Holding, if you did not love me." *He was right*, she thought. *He knew me better than I knew myself. It has been hell, no more no less, being wed to a man who loves me as he does, and not loving him.* And she began to weep again, weakly.

Gerald sat up in bed, and flung back the scarlet cloth curtain, and looked at her closely. "Clarissa," he said, "You are ill. Tell me what it is, my sweet."

"It is nothing. I'm— I'm tired. That's all."

"Nonsense," said Gerald. "You are just trying to spare me. I know you, Clarissa. You'd crucify yourself to spare anyone you loved. You'd—"

"Don't!" she cried. "Don't! Gerald—you don't know me. That is what—what is wrong. I didn't know myself—until today. I— I'm such a beast!"

"God's final Name!" He was really alarmed now. "Clarissa—you must be in a fever!"

He had jumped up, and begun to dress, and his frantic face framed by his wild hair made her want to laugh hysterically. She controlled herself, and put out a hand, and drew him to her.

"Gerald—don't be ridiculous. I am not ill. I swear it. It's only— Gerald, what has happened to me since I came here? I— I have changed so."

She said it pitifully. She really believed it. She saw herself as a weary, scheming, ruthless woman; and her mind had kept not the vision of herself as she had really been, scheming and ruthless even in London, but her dream of herself: the blue and gold, beloved Blessed Lady.

Gerald sat down on the bed beside her, and took her in his arms. "Clarissa," he said, "you have not changed except to become more beautiful in body and in mind, with every day that you have been my wife."

She wanted to believe it. She tried to. But Ajax's eyes, in the moment when she had accused him of destroying not only herself but Gerald, filled her consciousness. Her nervous excitement, her tensity, gave her clear-sightedness. She realized she would never forgive herself for wounding Ajax as she had. Always, always, she would see his eyes, and hate herself. When he had left Feathergrant, when again the years and the miles lay between them as they had, in the black nights when she wondered if he was alive or dead, or possibly dying of shipwreck or the Indians, she would see his eyes.

"No!" she cried, and covered her mouth with her hand.

Gerald bent, and took the hand in his, and looked into her wild eyes.

"Clarissa, what is wrong? You must tell me. I cannot bear to see you suffer so."

She bowed her head, shuddering, and covered her face with her hands. But she could not banish the thought that had possessed her.

"Gerald," she said at last, and he had to stoop to hear her words, "Gerald—do you think I am cruel to—Ajax?"

"Cruel? Good God, of course not! Perhaps, at times, you may be a trifle overzealous for him. But I daresay it is natural for a mother to desire perfection for her son."

Her son. He had mistaken her meaning. Perhaps it was as well, she thought wearily. After all, it would not be possible for Gerald to understand how cruel she could be, or had been, to his brother. Nor did she need Gerald's opinion. Ajax's eyes must tell her that, forever.

She jumped up, went to the window, stood staring out at the browning lawn, the sundial. "You and love encompass all my hours." It was that for her, too. And it always would be. She knew it, knew there would be no escape for her, ever, from herself, from Ajax's eyes.

She turned from the window, driven by desperation and despair, knowing what must be the price of her peace, hating herself for yielding.

"Gerald," she said, "Do you greatly desire the boy to go with Ajax?"

He was so stunned by her question he could not answer. She said swiftly, her words rushing as if she would strengthen her faltering resolution with haste, "If— If you desire it—greatly— I shall not stand in his way." She thought, *I shall blame it on his insistence. Ajax will never know his will swayed me.*

Gerald crossed to her, and took her in his arms. "Clarissa—My darling, my wonderful, generous Clarissa!" He hesitated. "You do mean it, don't you?"

She shrugged, forcing a rueful smile. "It is what you wished, isn't it?"

"More than you will ever know. Ajax must be very lonely, Clarissa."

Clarissa's breath caught. She bent her head to Gerald's breast, that he might not see the radiance that had sprung into her face.

He will never be lonely again, she thought. This was the last barrier between us, and it is down. When he hears I have yielded, he will be as he was. I shall tell him it was Gerald's wish—but he will care less for that than for getting his own will, no matter how.

The thought of Ajax as he had been, vital and violent, hers yet never hers, ran through her like a drug. She forced her voice to apparent indecision.

"You are sure, Gerald, that this is your own wish? That you are not being driven against your better judgment by Ajax's influence?"

"It is hard for you to believe, but Ajax influences me less than you imagine. I listen to him. Yes. I listen to you, also, don't I? But in the end, I make up my own mind."

She almost laughed aloud, but said demurely, "No one could know that better than I do!"

Gerald straightened. "Well, after all, my Clarissa, you would not want a man you could rule, would you?"

"No," she almost whispered. "And that—is truer than you realize."

She turned away quickly, her nostrils dilating, sensing again the joy of conflict with Ajax.

Ajax! she thought, Why—he's everything. Everything I do or say or think. My whole life pivots around Ajax. If I do not have him I shall go mad. And he—he will go mad, also. That is what is wrong between us. That is why we treat each other as we do. Our whole lives are distorted, twisted out of normality. We are both sick, in body and mind. The only cure for either of us is in the other's arms.

IX

THE CHRISTMAS season was to end with a Twelfth Night Feast of Misrule at Rawlinsgap. The Lockeyes and Hubbards and Ludlows would join in it, and as the Rawlinses kept only three house slaves, the other near-by plantations had lent those they could spare. From Feathergrant, Naomi and Nera and Hannibal had gone down river two days before, their barge weighted with a boar Ajax had killed, in seasonable defiance against the law forbidding the killing of wild pig. "After all," he said, "Christmas is Christmas, and the Stacys, being true Oxonians, should feast on their memorial boar's head, under whatever rule they find themselves!"

Clarissa had answered quietly, "You must explain the custom to your namesake, brother. Gerald has been urging me to take him, and it will be as good a time as another for him to begin his traditional devotion to Oxford, I daresay."

Light leaped into Ajax's eyes. "Clarissa— You mean you—"

"I have never raised any objection to his going to Oxford. If you will recall, it was Gerald who asked whose son the lad was." And she passed him quickly, her lips curved in a small, tight smile.

She had begged Gerald not to tell Ajax of her decision, deliberately postponing the moment, waiting, hoping, to have him alone when she yielded. But all the Christmas season there had been people—people of high and low estate, slaves and titled personages, begging or bearing gifts, or merely rushing through the house caroling and crying incoherent greetings. It was as if the growing sobriety of the season at home had egged the colonists to unprecedented wildness, and the Governor pointed in vain to the increasing danger of Indian forays under the guise of Mummers. His warnings were flung back in his ears with cries of, "Then

why don't you give us the protection we've asked?" and the revelry swept on to a triumphant climax.

At Rawlinsgap, also, the season had been joyously observed, though neither Christopher nor Amy had celebrated it with the brilliance of the Stacys. There had been a well-filled board, and whoever came was welcome; but they made no pretense to social precedence. Rawlins was well established, a sound member of the community and one whose word bore weight, and his sister was liked and respected, but he had never attempted to conceal the circumstances of his coming. So when Ajax's boat arrived, Amy's red cheeks brightened with excitement, and there was a new glow in her eyes, when she ran to tell her brother of it.

"We shall deck it with rosemary and bay!" she cried, "and let Hannibal carry it in, out of compliment to the donors."

He could not help seeing the light in her face, and tried to echo her pleasure, but his thoughts were troubled. No one knew better than he that the Stacys of Stacys Holding did not seek their wives among the Rawlinses, however decent and prosperous they might be.

He was still thinking it, an hour later when she returned. Her delight was dimmed, and he saw that the bustling gaiety with which she had made earlier preparations was lacking now. He said finally, "What is it, Amy? Has something gone wrong?"

She looked up, startled. "Wrong? No. I—don't think so. I am *sure* not."

"From the way you say it, I know you're sure of no such thing. Why not tell me?"

"Chris—" she hesitated, crossing to him, her forehead wrinkled. "Did you ever hear anything about—about Mistress Stacy's older boy?"

"Ajax?" He glanced up at her quickly, and away, remembering the night of the child's birth. "Hear anything about him? What is there to hear? I was there the night he was born, and I've never seen a finer baby."

"You mean—you were actually there?" He nodded, and she drew a long breath, and sat down on the joint stool at his feet. "Tell me about it."

"Tell you what? There's nothing to tell, except that Mistress Stacy had an unusually bad time."

"Think, Chris. Are you sure there was nothing unusual about the boy?"

"Lord have mercy, no! I said he was as fine as—"

"Chris. Naomi's been talking to Hepsibah. They knew each other, from the first."

"Yes. I know. What of it?"

"Chris—how long had the Stacys been married when—"

Rawlins frowned, and leaned forward, and put his hand on Amy's shoulder. "The child was premature, if that's what you mean. Mistress Stacy was frightened. Good Lord, Amy—such things happen often enough." He rose, and filled his pipe, his face troubled. "You shouldn't have listened to the gossip of black slaves."

"I didn't listen!" She faced him indignantly. "Naomi said she only pretended to be frightened, and Hepsibah said she knew almost as soon as she set foot on land— Chris! What are you going to do?"

"They'll be soundly thrashed for this!" he exclaimed, taking up the bull whip.

She had never seen him so angry. She ran to him and caught his arm.

"Chris! Don't! It's Christmas—"

"Christmas! What does Christmas mean to heathen savages out of a jungle?"

"You mustn't!" she cried, tugging at him. "Naomi's not yours, nor Nera either, and—"

"Nera! So she had her tongue in it, too! I might have guessed as much!"

"Chris," Amy said desperately, "if you do this, you'll lose more than you gain. After all, what are you so troubled about? Isn't it that you fear we'll lose prestige, if they say

such things? Well, then— What do you think will happen if they know I eavesdropped, and gave such credit to their lies that I repeated them to you?"

He glared at her a moment, before his eyes dropped. "Perhaps you're right," he said uncertainly. He put the whip back on its hook behind the door. "To think they've been storing this—this swill, all this time!"

He went to the mantelshelf, and picked up his pipe. His mind was whirling. *Only pretended she was frightened*, he thought, and recalled how, in the confusion of that night, he had realized that it could not have been Naomi's ridiculous stuffed serpent that frightened Clarissa, for when she had screamed, Naomi had not even taken the thing from her own quarters. *It was probably a real one*, he told himself uneasily. *Lord knows there are enough of the filthy things around.*

Amy said, "Thank you, Chris. I knew you'd know."

"Of course, I knew." He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and to make assurance doubly sure, blustered, "After all, Amy—be reasonable. Gerald Stacy came here five months before Mistress Brinton. At the very most, she could have been only a couple of months pregnant—"

"I know, of course. But they must have imagined someone else was the father, I suppose."

"Someone else! Don't be silly. The child's a Stacy through and through. All you have to do is look at his uncle."

"I know," said Amy faintly. "That's—what I was thinking."

She left the room quickly, hurrying about her many tasks, but the carol was gone from her pretty lips, and her clear eyes were troubled.

It couldn't be, of course, she told herself a dozen times, *It couldn't be*. But she could not put the idea from her head, and after the guests had arrived, she caught herself watching Clarissa and Ajax, in spite of her resolve to believe none of it.

Clarissa had never been so beautiful. There was a radiance about her, and her laughter bubbled like a clear spring from a secret source. She did not take the lead as she had at Feathergrant, but threw it gracefully to Amy, suggesting while she seemed to defer, covering the girl's uncertainty with her own *savoir faire*.

When the hour came for the feasting, she drew her aside. "You have not yet chosen your Lord of Misrule, Mistress Rawlins."

"No," Amy said. Her eyes strayed toward Ajax, and she colored hotly. "I thought—possibly—"

"They have a charming custom in France," Clarissa interrupted quickly, thinking *How right I was!* "I've baked you a little cake, myself. It has a small trinket in it, and whichever gentleman gets it will be your Lord. They call it the *galette des Rois*, and there is much amusement in it."

She went quickly to a tall screen, behind which she had placed her offering. *I shall arrange it so that Gerald will get it. It will delight him—and keep him busy*, she thought, and handed the bright sweetmeat to Amy.

It was a charming confection, gay with ribbons and little bells, like a fool's cap, one ribbon unmistakably her own, Madonna blue and gold. She knew that Gerald would choose it, and that for the rest of the evening his duties would liberate her.

Tonight, she thought, *Tonight, I shall tell Ajax*—and her eyes strayed to the moonlit lawn, and the shadow of their barge, heaped with fur robes, moored below. *It's warm for Twelfth Night*—and her lips curved, as she forced her attention back to Amy, surrounded by the clamoring men, laughing and trying to explain the use of the cake she guarded from their grasp.

"But who shall be first?"

"Who first?"

There was a second's pause, and again Clarissa saw Amy's

eyes stray to Ajax. He was standing with his namesake on his shoulder, so that the boy might see the fun.

Amy cried, "The youngest of you, of coursel" and held out her hand.

Ajax put the boy down. He had never looked so handsome, Clarissa thought grudgingly. His eyes were bright, and his cheeks flamed between the long curls that fell over his King Charles collar. He walked to Amy, straight and self-possessed as an admiral, and only Ajax realized the control that commanded his excitement.

"That one," he said, and put the tip of his forefinger instantly on the blue and gold knot.

"Nol" Clarissa exclaimed, but in the clamor of the others' choosing no one heard her. She ran to Gerald. "It's impossible," she whispered. "That is the marked piece. It has my colors, and I thought you'd choose it. I meant it for you."

Gerald laughed, and kissed her hair quickly. "It seems to run in the blood, my sweet. The Stacy men choose your colors instinctively."

She looked at him quickly, but his eyes were guileless of any shadow of an *arrière-pensée*.

She pressed it. "But that child cannot conduct the revel, Gerald. It will spoil the whole rout! You'll have to help him."

"Oh, no, I shan't! You wait and see. There—look!"

Young Ajax was crumbling his cake with grave eagerness, as if he were quite sure of what he would find. When the bright bauble lay in his hand, he ran to Ajax, with a cry of incredulous joy that made the man's eyes smart.

"I *hoped* so," he said over and over, "I *hoped* so! But I didn't really *b'lieve* so, Uncle Ajax!"

Ajax tied the trinket around the child's neck like an order, with Clarissa's colors. Then he undid his own scarlet rosette, and stretched it across the boy's breast, as Amy hurried over with the tinsel cap, half-crown, half cockscomb,

that she had prepared. They tied a bunch of holly on a wand, and swung the child to the top of a court cupboard, with Ajax by his side, his own eyes bright with the reflection of his son's joy.

Clarissa thought, *He loves him—he loves him more than he ever could love me*, and a pang of jealousy and contradictory pride ran through her, as she curtsied elaborately, with the rest, to the new monarch.

As soon as the homage was over, Ajax whispered to his namesake. He nodded very gravely, and clapped his hands.

"I beg your obedience, and I will show you ben—ben—"

"Benevolence," Ajax whispered.

"Benvelance not known of late." His deep, relieved sigh was covered by his subjects' cheering. Ajax whispered to him again, and he piped, "Bring the boar's head, Han'ball"

The back door was flung open, and Hannibal appeared, flanked with slaves bearing candelabra, the garlanded boar's head held high.

Ajax had begun to sing, and the boy's treble caught the old carol. The others swung into line, as gay in the small space as ever they had been in the great halls of England.

"Caput apri defero,

Reddens laudes Domino.

The boar's head in hand bear I,

Decked with bays and rosemary—"

Clarissa, weaving with the others through the traditional figures, thought, *Nothing ever goes as I plan it, any more. I must always wait*—and again, resentment against the boy pricked her. Wait—wait until, exhausted with excitement and effort, the child fell asleep, liberating his "Minister." Only then could she hope to claim Ajax's attention. Only after her son's pleasure was fulfilled. Her lips set, and she entered the madcap revels with a recklessness outstripping

all her former wildness, leading a frenzied, prankish homage to the little Lord of Misrule.

Amy Rawlins watching her, watching the man and boy together, blinked back her tears, and laughed a little shrilly. It cannot be true, she told herself. It cannot be true! But in her troubled, gentle heart, she knew that it was.

X

ALL THAT night and into the next day the revel lasted, as if the merry-makers were loath to let the mummery of the season pass, for the hard business awaiting them.

Every ship brought disquieting news from England. The Civil War had swept from Scotland to Cornwall, and hardly a shire but knew the sound of cannonading, the terror of burned homes. Laud had been taken to Parliament for preliminary hearings, before what promised to be the most emotional trial in English history. More people on both sides of the Atlantic were personally interested in the fate of William Laud than in the fate of any other prisoner who had ever stood before the English Bar. He had lain three years in the Tower, while men with cropped ears recalled how much they had heard, and widows, wasted with flight and hiding, discovered how great was the strength in dead men's arms.

Always, the old world cast its shadow on the new. Berkeley, raging at the blasphemous audacity of a roundhead Parliament defying its anointed King, passed on his ill humor to the citizens of Virginia in a point-blank refusal of the protection they desired, his head too filled with large cavalry maneuvers and the besieging of great cities to make such trifling menaces as "wild men and marauders" seem worth serious consideration or expense. Winthrop, privately assured that the flighty reign of Charles would never again run in its old channels, tightened his control over his opponents, and cast a stern and predatory eye toward the Isle of Errors.

Against this somber and uncertain background, the commerce of New England, fed by its fisheries and ships, gained not only in importance but significance, and the tobacco

and cotton of the southern colonies increased a will to freedom, as well as the planters' wealth.

But for a little, for the Holy Days, such matters had been set aside, and it was almost with a sense of shock that Gerald heard Rawlins's suggestion that several of them wait immediately upon the Governor.

"The spring will be here before we know it," he said, "and you know what that means. A barn burned here, and a warehouse there, if we escape worse. Such matters may not seem of great importance to the Governor, but to some of us they mean just the margin of living."

Gerald nodded grimly. "When are you going?"

"At once. I thought if you could stay here for tonight, we would start the first thing tomorrow morning. There is hardly time now to do the necessary construction."

"But my wife, and the boy—"

"Your brother's here. Surely, he can take them back in safety, with the slaves. After all, it's not yet dusk, Stacy." Rawlins's smile twitted him on what he knew to be his notorious devotion to his beautiful wife.

He smiled back, a little grudgingly. "Very well. I daresay that's as good a plan as any."

"Of course," Rawlins said, and slapped his back heartily. *That settles it*, he thought. *Amy was wrong, and those damn blacks, as well. Gerald Stacy's nobody's fool. He'd have suspected it before this, if there were anything in it.* And he went to tell Amy, feeling very clever, and considerably relieved.

Clarissa, too, felt clever and relieved, when Gerald told her of the plan, though she was careful to seem to demur. Even when she and her son and Ajax were in the barge, she was cautious, letting escape no hint of her pounding heart at the nearness of her body to Ajax's, wrapped together as they were, in the fur robes. On the way home, she scarcely spoke, though the boy was asleep, and the slaves, huddled

together at the far end, could not have distinguished any words she might have said to the man at her side. But now that the time was ripe, and fate at last had put the moment in her hands, she toyed with it, postponing and perfecting it to her will.

I must not let him suspect, she thought. I must seem to be as I have been, opposing him until he is forced to make me yield. And she closed her eyes, incredulous that after all the years of tumult, this night would seal her peace.

Arrived at Feathergrant, Ajax carried the boy to bed, standing a long time looking down into the flushed face, stooping at last to kiss the hand still clutching the tinsel crown.

Poor lad, he thought, Lord of Misrule, indeed, and pressed his hand across his suddenly dimmed eyes, as he returned downstairs.

Clarissa had left the great room. Ajax was not surprised. He had hardly thought that she would wait, though he would have given much for a word with her, safe from interruption. Some day before he left Feathergrant he must tell her of the tragic blunder that had warped their lives. For with every passing day, he realized more fully that her life, as well as his own, had been twisted by that night at Stacys Holding. That night, they two had stood before a fatal door, holding keys of lead and of gold. It was enough that they should have chosen the wrong key for themselves. No matter what it cost, they must not drag their child through, after them.

A small sound made him look up quickly. The fire had burned very low, and the candles were guttering. He had not realized how long he had sat there, jumping up now and again to stride back and forth, his tumultuous remorse, Fury-like, at his heels. Now, seeing Clarissa in the doorway, he half believed he was dreaming, and rose slowly to his feet, his eyes held unwavering by hers.

Only when she started toward him did that look break. As his eyes dropped, he realized they had been like fencers, their blades tip to tip, before a mortal duel.

She had flung a robe of black velvet over a gown of some sheer stuff. It flowed back with her walking, and the gauze clung to the slender limbs and small breasts he remembered so bitterly well. Was she aware of it—and his racing, responsive blood? She stopped, so close she almost touched him, and looked up into his eyes for a long minute without speaking.

"Ajax," she said at last, "Tell me the truth. Why did you come here? Oh, I know what you are going to say—" she thrust his half-formed words away, with a gesture. "You will say, of course, that it was to see Gerald. But don't you think—deep in your heart—that you owe me the truth? If—if you ever do think of me, deep in your heart," she added, almost whispering.

"If— Good God, Clarissa—"

"Yes?" She raised her innocent, appealing eyes. "What were you going to say, Ajax? Surely—" she half smiled, and bitterness edged her voice—"surely, you cannot be afraid of me!"

"I came, exactly as you said, to see Gerald."

His voice was harsh, and he backed from her, until his shoulders pressed the mantelpiece, and he flung an arm over it, catching the edge defensively. She shook her head.

"No," she said. He could hardly hear her. "No. I feared you would not tell me—so I shall have to tell you. You came to get Ajax. Didn't you?"

"To get— Clarissa, are you mad? I never knew the boy existed, until I saw him here. You might as well say I came to see you!"

"I might wish you had." Her glance, flashing to his, made the almost inaudible words myrrh.

"I came," he repeated heavily, "to see Gerald. That is the whole truth."

She hesitated, as if considering it, and shook her head. "If

that were so, why should you change so quickly? Why should you want to take my son from me?"

"He is also my son, Clarissa." Her cry cut his words. He waited. "Well, Clarissa? He—is, isn't he?"

"What if he is?" she demanded tensely. "Is bearing your son just cause for your cruelty to me? At least, I saved him from the stigma of bastardy, which is more than you did! But now, as soon as it suits your purpose, you come here to take him from me—"

"Clarissa, you must hear me. I had no such idea, until—"

"Well? Until what? Speak, will you?"

"Clarissa— Don't. I cannot hurt you—"

"Hurt me? Hurt me? Lord of Heaven, are you fool enough to think that anything you could still do or say would hurt me?"

"I—think this might. But I shall have to say it. I would not dream of taking him, if I thought—you loved him. Clarissa, you may not realize it, but sometimes, you are really cruel—"

"Cruel? I—cruel? Oh, yes. Of course. I am cruel—to all the Stacys. I recall, before, you reproached me with betraying Gerald—"

"Clarissa, you must listen. That was—madness. I did not know until I came here. If I had known—"

"What difference would it have made? It was madness—yes. You were mad, that night, Ajax Stacy, mad for love of me, that you called hate. And so you gave me my child—in hate. And in hate, I shall keep him. Do you understand?"

"No—no, Clarissa. You—were right. You knew, then. God knows you taunted me with it bitterly enough. I did love you."

She dropped her eyes quickly, so that he might not read the triumph in them. When she dared to speak, she said, "So. It was true, then. You did love me. I was so sure of it, but I knew so little of men. Yet I was sure of it, when you held me in your arms. Do you remember, Ajax?"

"Do— Yes. I remember."

Her lowered eyes saw the sweat, shining suddenly on the fine hairs of his clenched hands. She said softly, "But later, Ajax. Did you hate me—later? All these years—when you have been alone—"

"No. I have never hated you. I have always loved you, Clarissa—from the moment I saw you, until—"

"Until—?" Her look flashed up. It was honestly frightened. "Until—"

"Until I saw you here—as Gerald's wife."

She began to laugh, softly, then wildly, catching her lip at last between her teeth, until she could force words. "And that, of course, changed everything. You—and me. So that neither of us was the person we had been—so short a lifetime before! We were both changed, like the dead, 'in the twinkling of an eye—' Ajax Stacy, stop lying to me, and to yourself! You know as well as I do, that when we faced each other out there, we knew there was no threat in earth or hell or heaven that could hold us from each other's arms! You knew—"

"Clarissa, don't! For God's sake, have mercy on me—"

"Why should I have mercy on you? You had none on me. You took me and cast me aside like a whore. You left me without a thought, to live or die, in poverty and disgrace. Mercy! What mercy was it to come into a wilderness, penniless and half dead with carrying your child, and—"

"Clarissa, why did you come here? If you did not love Gerald— Or was it because you did not love him? Because you thought that you could hurt me through him? No, no. That is too fantastic, even for madness like ours. But why did you come? There were twenty men in London, who would have given their souls—"

"And one, who had. You. But—you were no longer in London, Ajax."

"But— Good God, Clarissa— You cannot mean that you came here to find me!"

"Why else?" She forced her lips to smile. "Sometimes, you are not very clever, Ajax."

"Clarissa— But—God have mercy on me. After the way I treated you!"

"What of it? I loved you. I loved you—even when I knew that was why I had lost you. Men! I am sick of men—howling and singing their cheap passion to the stars, as if it were just cause for pride. But let a woman be moved by a hairsbreadth, and she is a trollop, to be used and forsaken."

"Clarissa! Stop— You—"

"Do you think I do not know that if I had withstood you, you would have stayed, if it cost your life and all that you possessed, until you conquered my will?"

"You don't know what you're saying—"

"I have known nothing else every hour of every day since you left me. If I had withstood you that one night, I would have had you—now."

"Clarissa, do—" He turned away sharply. He had so nearly said it: Do you want me now? Her eyes had told him what the answer would be. She said very softly:

"What were you going to say, Ajax?"

"I think—you know. It was something I must not say. And you must not hear. Good night, Clarissa."

She stood very still, looking at his back, silhouetted against the window, pale with dawn. Her hands were pressed together, and little by little, the color left her face. When at last she left him, her tread was so light he did not hear her go.

After a long while, he turned from the window, and saw the candlelit oblong of her open door. He had known it would be so.

He saw her as she had been that night, slim and lovely and incredibly virginal, her white beauty fired with unguessed passion. He sank his forehead on the mantelshelf, beating his head with his great fists, fighting torture with torture.

Clarissa loved him. She had always loved him. Even as he loved her. All the time, she, too, had been starved and

tortured—for tonight. And it was his fault. But for him, she would have been in fact Gerald's cherished and contented wife, the mother of usual and pretty children. But for that one night, and the door they had opened, together.

And tonight, they stood before another door. He, and the same Clarissa. But she was not the same Clarissa. This Clarissa was the wife of his brother, the brother who had never seen her as she was, as he had made her, but only as the Blessed Lady of his dreams. Because of him, she was not the Blessed Lady. Because of him, all her vows could not make Clarissa love the man she had sworn to cherish in wedlock.

He had set himself up as God, to judge and to avenge, and Clarissa had said no more than truth when she accused him: "Nothing I could do could equal what you did to him that night."

That night. A fever in his veins, a wasting of flesh and spirit. Neither distance nor years could remove him from it.

Tonight, there was neither time nor space to separate him from Clarissa.

His teeth closed on his lip, and he began to stride back and forth, over, across, unevenly, as if he would escape himself, the inescapable. The sweat ran over him, and a globe of blood zigzagged down his chin.

No one would know if he crossed the narrow hall and entered the dawn-gray chamber where Clarissa waited. Clarissa, who had waited, as he had, through the years.

Surely, she was more his than Gerald's. He had loved and possessed the real Clarissa, a woman of flesh and blood, passionate and hurt and eager, not a pallid figment of his own imagining. He had had her first, and her first-born child was his son.

His son. Ajax Stacy. His son—the honor of whose name he had promised to guard with his life.

Steadily, he raised his eyes. He knew that all this time he

had avoided what he now saw: a javelin, clasped by two right hands--and across it, Gerald's broken feather.

The rising sun touched the motto, turning it to blood and flame.

IN HONOR, STRENGTH.

He opened the front door quickly, and went out into the dawn.

XI

IT WAS evening when Gerald returned to Feathergrant. Rawlins had wanted to keep him for the second night, but some indefinable compulsion drove him home, riding Rawlins's horse wildly through the ill-defined forest trails.

He was exhausted in mind and body when at last he turned into the clearing, and stopped impatiently as Nera ran toward him, her hand outstretched for his bridle.

"Where are the boys?" he said, but she did not answer. As he dismounted, he saw her eyes, luminous, fixed on him, in the cabin firelight. There was no mistaking her look, nor the hand she put on his arm. He shrugged it off, and spoke harshly. "Go back to the cabin," he said, "and stay there. Or shall I tell Hannibal to keep you better? Have you forgotten you're his wife? Even a black wants his wife to himself, I daresay."

She looked at him a long minute, her eyes shining, though whether with mockery or desire he could not guess. He only knew that when he left her, she began to laugh, and that her laughter still rang in his ears and his brain as he opened the door of the great house.

He did not enter. What held him, he did not know. Everything was as it should have been. The myrtle tapers were lit in the fine sconces, the fires glowed and crackled in the hall and great room. But there was a silence . . . a silence. . . .

He cried, "Clarissa! Ajax!" His voice trembled. It broke the silence but could not defeat it. Even a child's sob seemed no more than a part of it.

Young Ajax ran downstairs, flinging himself against him, clasping his knees, burying his swollen tear-stained face against him. Gerald caught him up in his arms. His throat

was too tight to speak again. He strode to the bedchamber, and looked in.

Clarissa lay upon the bed, straight and still and white as the dead. But she was not dead. The candles on the candle stands to left and right of her heightened the impression, yet proved she was not dead. She turned her eyes in her immobile face as Gerald entered, and her white lips moved without sound.

He strode to her and stooped to kiss her, and her breathing broke in what might have been a sob, but that the will and strength for weeping were no longer in her.

"Clarissa—my darling— In God's Name, what is it? Where is Ajax?"

Her eyes sparked at the name, but the spark faded instantly. Her white lips made words that he could hear. "He is gone."

"Gone! God's final Name, he can't be gone! There is nowhere for him to go—"

"He is gone," Clarissa repeated, and closed her eyes.

Gerald turned to the boy. "What do you know of this? Where is your uncle? What has happened to your mother? Oh, for Christ's sake, boy, speak!"

"I don't know. It was all—this way—when I woke up—"

Gerald thrust him aside and strode to the back door. "Blanche! Hannibal! Elias! God's final Name, where are those good-for-nothing black bastards? Here! Come in here. Get the rest, and bring them all in."

They obeyed, shuffling and faltering, staring at the floor, the ceiling, anywhere but at him. He yelled at them. "Speak! What is it? What's wrong? Good God alive, can't you hear me?" They nodded wildly, but still neither looked at him nor answered. He drew a long breath, and strode to the cupboard where he kept the bull whip. He cracked it on the floor, and their eyes rushed to it, magnetized. He spoke more quietly, but his voice shook with intention. "If you

don't answer me, I swear to Almighty God I'll have the flesh off your bones. Now, speak up."

Elias opened his mouth. He ran his red tongue over his thick lips, but he still stared at the tip of the whip, and no sound came. Gerald raised the stock slowly, and the tip wriggled. The black fell on his knees, screaming, covering his head with his huge knotted hands.

"I speak," he yelled, "I speak—but I ain' say' nothin', case they ain' nothin' t' say. We don' know nothin'. Hones' t'Gawd, we don'."

"Hones' t'Gawd, we don'," the others took it up. They mumbled it, over and over, like a chant, like an incantation, swaying to its rhythm. "Don' know nothin' . . . don' know nothin' . . ." Against the sinister chorus, Elias was still speaking.

"Han'bal 'n' Blanche 'n' Naomi come out back, 'n' say yo Lady 'n' Marst' Ajax, 'n' boy-chil' go in house. 'Smawnin', Han'bal come fix fiahs."

"Come fix fiahs, lak's always," Hannibal agreed.

The others moaned, "Don' know nothin' . . . don' know nothin' . . ."

Hannibal took up the story. "Lady-Mis' sleepin' lak she sleepin' now. Marst' yo' Brothah nowheah, 'n' 'at's all I know."

"But he must be somewhere! Are you mad, all of you? It's winter, you fools, it's winter! Don't you know that? A man couldn't live— In God's Name, you'll pay for this. He's hurt—the wolves— How dared you stay here, sparing your worthless black hides while my brother—" His voice broke, and Hannibal said gently:

"We all look, Marst'. We all look good. I swear 't t' God, we look. He ain' nowheah. We bin back'n'fo'th, 'n' look in ev'y foxhole. We ax th' birds, an' we ax' th' squ'ls. Ain' nowheah."

"Don' know nothin' . . . Don' know nothin' . . ."

"In God's Name, stop that! Stop, do you hear? He's not a

ghost, to fade into air! He must be there— I'll go, too—" He strode to the room where Clarissa lay, and caught up his cloak.

"Clarissa— My darling— Tell me, can you remember anything? Did he say anything, anything at all about where he was going? Try to remember, my Clarissa—"

Clarissa's face quivered. "I remember—everything," she whispered. "He said—nothing."

He knelt beside her, and pressed his shaking lips to her cheek. "What happened, my Clarissa? Try to tell me what happened."

"Nothing." She looked in his eyes, and her lips drew back from her teeth in a ghastly smile. "Nothing . . . happened. I swear . . . nothing happened . . . husband."

He rose, and went into the hall. *I am mad*, he thought, *stark mad*.

Buckling his cloak around him, he caught up his pistol and started for the door. Young Ajax barred his way.

"May I go? May I go, too?"

"No. You must stay here, and—and look after your mother." He heard the slaves starting out, calling to each other as they spread fanwise into the woods. "Have they been out before?" he asked the boy sharply.

"Oh, yes. Most all day."

Relief and fear touched him. *They did go, then. But it could have happened last night, before anyone knew.* He turned to go, suddenly aware that outside the tumult had increased—and stopped.

The front door opened gustily. Ajax strode in. His forehead was bruised, and a red welt laced his cheek where a low branch had struck him, but his eyes met Gerald's, undimmed in his set face.

"Gerald! Thank God, you're back."

"I'm back!" Gerald cried. "Thank God, I'm back! Where in God's Name have you been?"

"Taking a little stroll," said Ajax. His voice was steady, but his hand shook as he poured himself a drink.

"Ajax! Are you mad? A stroll! Look at you."

Ajax glanced at his torn doublet, at his legs, caked with mud and blood.

"It's bad country for walking," he conceded. "You should do something about it. I daresay you will, eventually."

He drained his glass, and poured another.

Gerald's eyes flashed. "Before you get too drunk to answer me, you might tell me what's happened."

Ajax raised his eyes quickly, and lowered them. "Happened? What could have happened?" He lifted the glass to his lips.

"That's what I want to know." He leaned forward and rested his fists on the table between them. "What did you do to Clarissa?"

Ajax lowered his glass slowly. "Clarissa?" His breath caught. His words rasped, all his false poise broken. "Clarissa! God have mercy on me—" He strode to the door, blindly avoiding Gerald's outstretched hand, and reached Clarissa's side.

She looked up, and saw him there. Her set, pale face seemed to break, to fall apart like splintered porcelain.

"You're alive," she whimpered, "You're alive—and I thought I'd killed you."

She reached out her hand, and took his, and pressed it to her cheek.

XII

GERALD FROWNED, and knocked out his pipe. "I wish to God you and Clarissa would stop quarreling. Even the blacks notice it."

"Do they?" Ajax asked.

"How can they help it? Look at tonight. You can't tell me they did not know what the trouble was."

"Did they?"

"Oh, for God's sake— What's happened to you anyway?"

"Nothing. Nothing—in longer than I can remember. Sometimes I feel as if I were not even alive any more."

"Well, you came damn near not being, if you want to know. This isn't the sort of country to 'stroll' in on winter nights." He looked at him closely. "I wish you would tell me what happened. Did Clarissa—"

"Clarissa—did absolutely nothing," Ajax said shortly.

"She said—"

"What if she did? You know Clarissa. She—she gets excited, at times. I suppose when they told her my bed had not been slept in and I didn't return, she was upset. That's all."

"She was upset before they told her anything."

Ajax's eyes veered to Gerald's. "Oh? How do you know?"

"Hannibal said she was that way when he came in to fix the fires. Whatever happened—happened earlier. Did you and Clarissa quarrel again?"

"We did not."

"Then what did she mean when she said she thought she'd killed you?"

"I cannot imagine, unless it was what I just told you—that she thought she'd sent me out in a huff, and I'd got lost."

"But if you weren't quarreling—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Ajax jumped up, slamming his glass on the table. It broke, and a fragment of the glass cut him. "What is this, the Star Chamber?"

He began walking up and down, shaking the blood from his hand to the floor, impatiently.

"Here," Gerald said, and gave him his neckerchief. "Sorry. I—didn't mean to pry." Ajax's eyes met his quickly. They seemed almost startled, Gerald thought. He said, "The thing I can't understand is, you're both so different when you're not together."

"Well, we shan't be together much longer."

The tone was so bitter Gerald said quickly, "Don't misunderstand me, Ajax. All that I meant was— Did Clarissa tell you her decision for Ajax?"

Ajax stopped walking. He did not speak, but Gerald saw him tense, as if he expected a mortal blow. He rose, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Don't think too ill of Clarissa," he said gently. "You must have done or said something—sometime—that hurt her. You probably don't even remember it. But after all—if you had that insane impression that she had betrayed me—" He stopped. Ajax was facing him stonily. Only his eyes seemed alive at all. They focused on Gerald's like a burning glass, forcing him to speak. "I was thinking—if you saw her in London, after I left—"

"I did not see her—in London—after you left. What were you going to say about the boy?"

"She wants to tell you, herself. But it's all a part of what I mean. You have no idea how she suffers, how she blames herself for your quarrels, after them. On Christmas night, she wept over you and the boy until—"

"Don't!" Ajax had turned away, and the syllable cut Gerald short. He stared at the wide shoulders, the bowed head, too amazed to speak. "Our quarrels have been my fault," he said at last. "I—don't think Clarissa and I will ever quarrel again."

"Thank God," Gerald exclaimed. "If you knew what it had cost me—"

"I think I know—even better than you do—what it cost you," Ajax said, "and now, let us never speak of it again."

He caught up his buff-coat and started for the door.

Gerald said, "Ajax— Just a minute— Don't tell Clarissa I told you of her weeping."

Ajax turned. He saw Gerald's apprehensive face, and his mouth pulled down wryly. "Don't fret. I'll never mention—any of this—to Clarissa."

Gerald said, "Where are you going now?"

"Just for a little stroll," Ajax told him. His ironic glance, his tone, challenged Gerald to responsive lightness. But Gerald only shrugged, as if he would say, I'm serious about all this. After a moment, Ajax left him, closing the door so gently Gerald frowned.

When he did not hear him walking, he went to the window, and pulled aside the printed linen curtains. Candle-light flowed over the woodpile. Ajax was bending, discarding, measuring, selecting. After a minute, he returned, kicking the door open with his toe, shut with his heel. He was carrying an armful of logs, and his face was flushed with stooping.

Gerald said, "Going to make a fire?"

Ajax dumped the logs on the hearth, straightened, grunting. "Like Cranmer's, I hope," he said. "It'll take a long time to put it out."

He selected a log, and sat cross-legged on the floor before it. He began to shape it with his hunting knife. After a while, he started whistling through his teeth, running his hand over the gracious curve emerging, as if he loved it. "Pity I couldn't find any locust out there."

"Cedar's not a bad wood," Gerald said. "What are you making?"

Ajax's eyebrows rose pityingly. "Not a horse," he told him, "but even you would probably know that much."

Gerald leaned forward, and ran his hand over the wood as Ajax had done.

"God's final Name! It's a boat!"

"She is a ship," Ajax corrected with dignity, "for my namesake. She'll be ketch-rigged, like the *Blessing of the Bay*. It is time he learned certain essentials—" he stopped. Gerald turned, following his gaze.

Clarissa stood in the doorway. She was very pale, and the rouge she wore accentuated her pallor. She put her hand on the door jamb, and it seemed shadow-thin. Gerald went to meet her, and she leaned on him heavily, without affectation.

Ajax rose slowly. *My God, only yesterday—* He went toward her, his eyes pleading. Clarissa smiled faintly, and Gerald led her into the room, seating her carefully on the new Russia leather couch, tucking a robe of sea green wool, bordered with galloon, around her.

She said faintly, "What are you making, brother?" She said the word differently. It was free from all taunt or innuendo.

Ajax looked at her swiftly. "I am making a ship," he said quietly.

Color crept into Clarissa's cheeks, and for an instant her small chin tilted perilously.

Gerald said hastily, "If you have not yet told Ajax—"

She caught the apprehension in his tone, and her glance flicked him mockingly. Then her lids fell. Ajax, watching, saw her small hands twisted together, her quickened breath. He knew what the struggle was costing her but he knew he could not help her.

After a long while, she said, "I suppose the ship is for your—namesake?"

Ajax, knowing how nearly she had said, "Your son," felt the sweat start from him. "Yes," he said. He crossed and stood over her, and she met his eyes, full. "It is for your son—with your permission," he said.

He saw the red circles start from her cheekbones as the

blood swept back from her face. He thought she would faint, but he dared not touch her. Gerald, watching them from the hearth, had the courage to keep silent.

She said at last, "You—may take him with you, when you go, Ajax."

Her voice was like a little autumn wind tearing the last leaves from a barren tree. So short a time before the leaves were vital to withstand a great storm, but now, they were sere, and ready to fall.

Ajax did not answer. He only stood looking down into her eyes.

After a while, the color flowed back into her face, as if his look had given her back her life.

XIII

IT WAS February when a rider brought Ajax word that the *Blessed Lady* lay at Newport Snow. The river was frozen above Jamestown, so the farewell expedition Gerald had planned with increasing anxiety as the cold closed in was definitely out of the question. Ajax, who had watched the ice blacken with growing hope, was as grateful as Gerald was dismayed. How could he have explained the ship's name to a brother who was, after all, neither inexperienced nor a fool?

The hour when he had named it, secretly amused at the Puritan distrust of its apparently Papist suggestion, rose vividly before him. The ship was smaller, more delicate, infinitely more perfect, than his other vessels. Actually, seeing her in the water at last, he had known her named already. Not until he had weighed anchor for Virginia had he thought of Gerald's reaction. Not until he had seen Clarissa, as his brother's wife, had he known what that reaction must be.

That Gerald had accepted at its face value both his former difficulties with Clarissa and their present amity, was, he felt, a final proof of the younger man's devotion not only to his wife but to his brother. That Gerald, being neither fool nor hermit, might know more in his heart than ever reached his lips, would have been devotion of a quality that even Ajax could not have comprehended.

Nothing had happened to strain that devotion since the night Clarissa had given her consent to the boy's accompanying Ajax on the cruise. A peace beyond pleasant words and ease of manner had descended on Feathergrant, and if Gerald made no claim on his wife during that month she attributed it to his consideration for her health, after the shock she had sustained.

It was true enough that she had not been wholly well for days thereafter. The long hours while she lay awaiting Ajax, secure still in her knowledge of his passion and his own acknowledgment of it; the hours while desire faded and doubt grew, until at last she rose colder than midwinter dawn had made her, and found him gone, and knew herself rejected; the hours while the slow sun, moving from window to window, changed her resentment to fear, as the slaves brought reports of his disappearance, and the terrible belief grew in her that she had sent him out to die—these had drained her body and mind of all her rich vitality.

For days, she managed the affairs of the plantation automatically, lying on the embroidered Russia leather couch, careless even that its background framed her beauty with new luster. Beauty was a worthless coin, its purchase power gone.

Even young Ajax's delight over the cruise failed to prick her jealousy or resentment. But as the days passed and she began to mend, she agreed to go with the men, to wave farewell to the ship as it left Jamestown. Deep in her heart, she knew what this generosity must cost her—but she offered it freely, an oblation for her former cruelty. Only when Gerald brought news the river was so frozen that the ship must stay near the sea, and that such a trip for her would be sheer madness, did she break, and weep with sheer relief, believing neither man realized that her tears were more than natural disappointment.

From that day, she planned and listed a hundred small surprises to put in the pack saddles of the horses sent from the plantation to carry food and supplies for the cruise. Ajax had insisted the ship would be well provisioned, but the preparation gave her such evident joy that he and Gerald yielded to her whim at last, and even thought up small luxuries that could be made under her supervision, knowing the occupation would fill her hours too full for thought.

Only, the night before they left, the weight of all the

years settled upon her. Before dawn, unable longer to bear the burden, she rose, and silently sought Ajax.

He was already up, hurrying with his packing. Unobserved, in the doorway, she watched him. The supple back, the expert hands, the eagerness of every motion stabbed her. When he turned and saw her there, the quiet tears were running unresisted over her small white face. In the instant he had taken her in his arms.

She strained against him as she had at Stacys Holding, until their bodies seemed to flow together, and all of time became one golden hour.

But when she loosed him, he made no effort to hold her. And so she returned to Gerald, and slept, at last.

Awakening, Gerald was loath to wake Clarissa. He lay listening to her peaceful breathing, and thinking back, realized she had not slept so since his brother's coming. He raised himself on his elbow, and looked into her face. Then he bent, and kissed her, very gently.

She smiled up into his eyes. It was an open smile, a child-like smile, such as she had not yielded him before. It was the smile from a heart at peace.

"You are content," he said, "you are content the boy is going."

It was a statement. The question he would have asked had already been answered by her smile.

They dressed, and hurried out. Ajax stood with a list, checking and rechecking. His son stood at his side, posture and expression so exactly like the man's that Gerald could not help laughing.

"Well," he twitted him, "Do you find everything satisfactory? What are the omens for a good voyage?"

The boy ran to him, and he picked him up, his eyes misting with fierce tenderness.

"You won't forget Feathergrant?" The child put his arms around his neck, hugging him so violently he almost choked. "That's right," he said, when he could speak again. "How-

ever you may love a ship, you must remember a man's home is his anchor. Look at it well, now—and never let it go.”

He put the boy down quickly, and turned to examine the pack horses, glancing at Clarissa to see if she had noted his weakness. *God's final Name*, he thought, *anyone would think I had objected to all this, not Clarissa!*

She was talking to Ajax quietly, the same gentle smile on her lovely face. A groom was leading out the horse Ajax and the boy were to ride. Behind him, stood Elias, who was to accompany them, and bring back the animals. He had on new striped breeches of linsey-woolsey, and Ajax's discarded buff-coat. Seeing it, Clarissa's smile faded.

I shall never be able to bear it, she thought, *That coat—every day—with Ajax gone!*

But immediately, she knew she would have thought of Ajax anyway. She had yielded him forever, and the hope that was her heart, but she would always think of him, because to think of him was life.

She said, “When will you be back?”

Ajax caught the note in her voice, and looked into her eyes steadily. “That is a thing no sailor can answer. By grace of God and the elements, we should return by April.”

Clarissa looked at the frozen river and shuddered. “It will be very cold.”

“Yes,” said Ajax. “But when I return, it will be spring.”

Their eyes met. “Yes. It will be spring.”

But it was no more than a chill statement of fact. It lay between them dead as figures on a calendar. The season's life, its meaning and fecundity, had gone from it, forever. For Clarissa, all the springs of all her life would be as this midwinter day.

Gerald turned from his inspection of the pack horses. He met Clarissa's teasing smile. It was as if she had reminded him that she had prepared and checked every item a dozen times.

He said, “Just the same, it takes a man to make sure!”

She laughed and slipped her hand through his arm. The little Gerald ran from the house, shouting inarticulate greetings and farewells, prancing like a hobby horse. Clarissa put out her other hand and drew him to her. *These two are mine—to keep—* The thought warned her as Ajax swung into the saddle, taking his son before him.

Blanche ran out with a stirrup cup. They passed the great tankard from one to the other, drinking it in sudden solemnity. Clarissa gave it to Ajax, last of all. He drained it. Then the little company was gone.

Gerald said, "If we go down to the river, we can see the turn in the road." She nodded, and they started silently.

Behind them, the blacks were cheering or howling, according to their temperament. Except for a thin line between her eyes, Clarissa did not notice them. She was straining toward the point where Ajax must appear. He looked back, as she had known he would, and waved as her blue scarf flashed. He had disappeared before the gesture was completed, but she did not move. She was not weeping, but her dry eyes were fixed blindly ahead, holding sorrow beyond tears.

Gerald turned, and saw her, her blue scarf crumpled, her eyes clouded.

"You are very brave," he said, and bent to kiss the hand upon his arm.

XIV

CLARISSA LAID down her sewing and went to the window. She did not know why she went to the window. The three terraces stretched to the river, the river curved to the sea. Day after day, they had been so. They would be so, always. The snow had fallen and melted. The ground had grayed with frost and browned with the spate and greened with spring. That was all. Yet she still went to the window, she still looked down the river.

She returned, folded her sewing, and put it in the court cupboard. Then she tossed a scarf over her head and shoulders and went out into the April air.

Little Gerald was playing outside the door. He had the rough wooden soldiers Elias had made for his brother, and when Clarissa paused, he looked up, offering her one, gurgling.

"Men, men, men, men," he bubbled, enchanted with his new word.

Men, Clarissa thought, *Men! God help me*. Yet even as she thought it, she knew the bitterness was habit. She did not really feel anything, even as she rumpled her fingers through the baby's curls.

Only when she raised her eyes, and looked past him to the fields of Feathergrant, a spark ran through her. Feathergrant. Here, at least, her dreams had not miscarried. Here, at least, the past was firm foundation for the future.

Four hundred acres lay under cultivation. The crop last fall had been the finest in the county. Gerald had been very proud of it. Clarissa smiled, remembering. In her heart, she knew the crop was her doing. She knew more of tobacco already than Gerald ever would.

She started down from the terrace toward the fields.

They lay broad and healthy, with the sheen of pale green enamel, where the young plants pricked the ground. The field hands plodded through them, loosening the earth, hunting signs of disease or pest. They had had less trouble with slaves at Feathergrant than at most of the other plantations. Gerald attributed it to his clemency. Clarissa knew this quality would have meant anarchy, without her ruthlessness to stiffen it. The blacks knew they would not be punished without cause. They also knew that just punishment would be immediate and merciless. With the exception of Nera they accepted it.

Nera had never rightly been assimilated into the system. To Clarissa's knowledge, she said nothing, did nothing, punishable. Yet wherever Clarissa went, she could feel Nera watching. In the shadows, behind the trees, watching. A hundred times, Clarissa had ordered her back to the quarters. She always went, without question or comment. She always left behind, in Clarissa's consciousness, the look in her opaque black eyes.

Clarissa told herself she did not know what that look meant. She knew that Nera hated her, as she knew the cause for that hatred. But she put these things away from her. They were finished. Nothing could change them or bring them into immediate importance. It was something else. If she had not had the good sense to realize how ridiculous it was, she would have been sure that Nera *knew*.

She saw her now, stretched in the sun, her four pickaninnies clambering over her like fat contented pups. She thought, *Lazy good-for-nothing*— But she put the thought away. Nera would have made an excellent house servant. She was more intelligent than most of the slaves, she was neat, and personable. It was Clarissa's own fault that Nera lay in the sun, in the intervals of breeding and cooking for the blacks. Clarissa would have liked to put her at field work, but Hannibal was practically major domo, and the line between field and house servants was already too fine-

drawn to put his wife in the tobacco. She thought, *What will I do with all her children?* And then, *Well, there's time for that trouble, Heaven knows.*

She paused a moment, making sure that the storage pit had been cleansed of winter refuse, and sanded, and lay open to the sun. Then she went on to the fields, her heart lifting as her expert eyes tested the crop, and saw how clean and straight the young plants were. The hands looked up, touched their forelocks, grinned, as she passed, bent to redouble their effort. She felt very powerful. Strength flowed up from the soil, entering her body, quickening her mind. She thought, *I am like the Queen*, and smiled, recalling Henrietta Maria's flight to Holland with the Crown jewels, her triumphant return, under the very noses of Parliament, with munitions and ten shiploads of men. All of England called the army of the North "the Queen's army," its standard "the Queen's standard"—and, ambiguously, the cannon she had brought, "the Queen's Gods." The Court was openly divided between The King's Side and The Queen's Side; though, as Clarissa thought, *It is his cause she fights, with her own weapons.* What if she had divided England against itself? What if the Court was riddled with foreigners? A united England would have defeated her purpose, and her cause was one with the Papists', whatever their nation. Even as Gerald raged at the Queen's pampering of Antrim, who had been so largely responsible for the massacre in Ulster, Clarissa smiled secretly, understanding. A ruler must rule, by whatever means came to hand. Clarissa, looking at the fields of Feathergrant, looking at the house set like a little jewel in its terraced gardens, knew that. The other planters had been for the most part content with oblong boxes, overcrowded with children and ugly furniture. Clarissa had added small details to the original structure, giving it a certain distinction, even grace, of its own.

It will be a fine place, she thought, returning slowly. *Even in my day, it will be a fine place.*

Even in her day. And after? That was a problem to which she had given much thought. The impulse of her heart, the seed that had lain in her subconsciousness and borne such unexpected fruit on Christmas Eve, was that the younger boy, Gerald, should inherit Feathergrant. But always, always, she remembered the hour of the older son's birth. In that hour, Feathergrant had been commenced. Secure in his belief that an heir was born to it, Gerald had broken the ground, felled the first tree, for Ajax, whom he thought his first-born. If she opposed that now, after all that had occurred— She shivered a little, and drew her scarf closer around her. All of her hope now lay in the soil. She must do nothing that would endanger her mastery of it.

She entered the house thoughtfully. Almost immediately, Gerald returned from his inspection of the fields. He had been riding hard, and slumped on the nearest chair, slashing his crop on his boot. He was frowning.

"They're processioning the county next week," he told her. "I'd forgotten this was the fourth year."

She said, "Must you go? After all, we're sure of our boundaries, aren't we?"

"Sure enough. There's ten acres or so in doubt between me and Rawlins. But I wouldn't press it, God knows."

"Then why—"

"Because, my sweet, the fine for not attending is exactly three hundred and fifty pounds of tobacco."

"But running round for days, with a chain, blazing trees, and—"

"I don't have to carry the chain. I don't even have to blaze. The surveyors and the chain-carriers do that. We only have to stand around and watch. And yell if we question a boundary."

"It seems to me ridiculous to take every planter in the county away for days, just when he's needed—"

"We aren't needed, now. That's the trouble. We can't find an excuse in the alphabet. That's why they shifted the time

for it, so it'd come between Easter and Whitsun. But why all the pother, here, when we have so much land that a couple of acres isn't worth the nuisance—"

"It might be some day," Clarissa said slowly. She was watching him covertly. "After all, when we are gone—Gerald, have you thought of what will happen here, when we are gone?"

She spoke quietly, but her heart was pounding with sudden determination. *It's fate*, she thought, *that this should have happened now. It was meant that I should press it.*

Gerald said carelessly, "Exactly what happens to any other estate, I daresay. Ajax will move in, and get himself a wife, and—"

"Gerald—Honestly, I am almost afraid to say this, for fear you may misunderstand. I haven't dared say it before. But—You know now I—I have changed, don't you? You know that—that—" she stopped.

Gerald was watching her, half amused, half troubled. "What are you trying to say, Clarissa? God's final Name—'afraid'! What of?"

"I don't want you to think ill of me. And so much has happened—"

He pulled himself out of his chair, and crossed, and kissed her. "No matter what happened, I couldn't think ill of you, my Clarissa. I'd always love you, no matter what happened. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," she said softly. She knew it was true. But there was more, necessary to her plan, than love. She said, "You'd love me, Gerald. I know that. But would you trust me?" She heard his breath catch with astonishment.

"If I could not trust you," he said slowly, "I would pray God to die."

"Gerald! I—I don't mean that way! I mean—with Feathergrant— No, no, listen to me. Have you stopped to think—What if anything happens to Ajax? They are not back, and—"

"They will be back, don't fret. It's early April—"

"Very well. Grant they will, though God knows there have been times when I have been sure—"

"My darling, that's just a woman's fancy. They'll be back, before you know it."

"And what then? Your brother will go about his business." She paused steadying her voice, swept on. "But he will return—God knows how soon—and take the boy, again. I know that. We both know it. When I consented to this voyage, I knew in my heart it was the end. The end of my son—here—I mean."

"He will always call this home, never fear. Feathergrant is in his heart, already."

"That is not enough. Ajax will train him to the sea. To care for Feathergrant as he must, he will have to be trained as a planter. No man can serve two masters."

Gerald rose, and began walking about. He realized now that some such thought had pricked him with doubt, when Ajax had first suggested taking the boy to sea. But he had been so torn, so torn between his two loyalties, to his brother and to his wife, that he had not been able to think clearly, to make a cold and balanced decision.

Clarissa saw his uncertainty and drove her advantage home.

"And for the rest— He will be in New England, and then at Oxford, for his education. And there will always be Stacys Holding. Have you thought of that? What assurance have you, have we, that he will not call Stacys Holding 'home'?"

Gerald stopped roaming, and met her eyes. "What do you want me to do?"

"I thought if—" she wavered. She could not ask that. Not yet. She said slowly, "I want you to think, Gerald. Try to think with your brain, and not your heart. Think what—might happen—and then—then do as you see fit."

"I can leave it to you," he said slowly. Her heart caught, and her lids slid quickly over her eyes. "You would do whatever seemed best—"

"I would do all that I could for—for everyone's good," she said. How nearly in her triumph she had said, "for your son." She must be careful. She added, "For that, you will probably outlive me—"

"God forbid!" Gerald cried. He was so honestly shocked that she laughed. He frowned, and slapped her mouth lightly. "Even you must not laugh at such a thing! If you don't care for *me*, what would happen to Feathergrant, without you?"

She did not answer. She did not need to. She knew that without her there would be no Feathergrant. She rose, and went to the window, and stared down the river. *At last*, she thought, *At last—I am 'a little Queen.'*"

XV

THROUGH HER dream, Clarissa heard a dog howl, and smelt smoke. She turned over, and murmured, "Gerald," and slept again. But the sound of her voice had broken her peace. She sat up suddenly.

Gerald was not there. Gerald had gone to Shirley Hundred, for the processioning. But the smoke was there. The smoke, and the howling dog—and something else. She jumped from bed, and ran to the window, tearing back the curtains with hands already stiff with terror her brain had not yet accepted.

Beyond the east woods, she saw a red haze, pierced by a column of flame. Rawlinsgap was burning. As she looked, another shaft shot upward. The warehouses. *But it can't be*, she thought. *They're too far from the great house to catch, without a wind.*

She knew then. She knew, even before she realized that the whole horizon was pocked with fire.

She ran into the hall, screaming. No one answered. Upstairs, the baby Gerald awakened, whimpering.

She caught up her cloak and Gerald's pistol, and lifted him from his crib. "Hush! Be still—do you hear?" But he felt her excitement, and began to yell, kicking and struggling wildly in her arms. She stuffed his shirt into his mouth and tied it behind his head. Crazed by her action, he fought with all his strength, and nearly threw her as she fled downstairs and to the back door. It stood wide open, and she knew what had happened. Warned in some way of the Indians' coming, the blacks had fled into the woods, leaving her and the baby to the savages' mercy. Rage shook her. She recalled how, in the massacre a generation before, not

a black had been killed on the seventy plantations destroyed. Jungle and forest had joined hands, against civilization.

But we are here, she thought, *we are still here*, and her teeth clenched against the terror in her throat.

She ran outdoors, without plan or purpose, stumbling, fighting the baby's struggles, knowing only that she must go from the house, that Feathergrant was doomed.

Where she could go, or how, she did not know. She stood in the still air listening, staring with wild eyes at the fire-ringed horizon. From Feathergrant's hilltop she could see the noose of flame tighten. She cried out at a sudden sound. A doe and her fawns raced past. She stared at the slender swath of darkness they had followed.

That way—that way—

It was the first clear thought she had had. It flashed through her confusion like a beacon. It was useless to attempt to flee before the savages, as the unreasoning animals had done. Her only hope was to cut back across their path, praying that no stragglers might beat through the uncultivated forest, or return over ground once spoiled.

She knew that as a rule the savages swept on, killing the men, burning buildings, driving away cattle, taking into captivity the women and children they could seize swiftly. Their main object was to terrorize, to destroy as much as possible before the white man's vengeance could overtake them. They seldom bothered to return, to attend details.

She stepped into the woods, and even the distant glow was lost to her. The darkness was tangible, at her throat, at her heart. Something touched her shoulder, and she was too frightened to scream. She only stood still, and felt it, hearing the snuffling breathing, so close it stirred her hair. It nickered gently, and relief weakened her so that she swayed against it. Yet even in that instant prescience chilled her. No horse at Feathergrant was loosed at night. She put out her hand, and touched the bridle, ran her fingers, trembling now with certainty, over the neck, back to the

saddle. Gerald's. Gerald's mare that he had ridden to the processioning. It had returned.

"No!" she cried, "No—" and then called—"Gerald—Gerald—"

A little wind reached the branches above her. They stirred and sighed echoing her cry. Otherwise there was no sound.

She felt the mare's coat. It was sweaty, roughened. On its shoulder a long gash quivered as she touched it. It was wet, sticky. The animal had not followed the road it knew. It had been forced through the woods, at a madman's speed, by a will beyond its own.

She knew now what had opened the path the deer had followed. She knew what had warned the blacks.

"Gerald!"

She was sobbing the name, over and over, as she went forward. When she stumbled on something, she fell to her knees. Her hand, flung out to save her, pressed Gerald's metal-studded leather riding suit. It discovered his heart, still beating.

"Gerald!" Her lips were urgent at his ear. "Gerald! Can you hear me—? Gerald, it's Clarissa!"

"Clarissa." She heard it, hardly more than a sigh, bubbling through the red froth on his lips. Then with a great effort, he stirred, as if her name had revived him. "Ajax," he gasped. "Ajax. Shirley Hundred."

She sat back on her heels. *He is mad*, she thought, *He is delirious*. But strength, unreasoning, triumphant, was flowing back into her.

"Go," he whispered, and she bent again. "Go. . . . north. . . ."

She knew now he was not delirious. Ajax had returned. Somewhere, beyond that wall of fire, Ajax's ship lay in the river. Gerald had seen it, as he rode to warn her. He had seen it—but he had not stayed. He had not saved himself.

She bent, and spoke to him. All her will was concentrated in her words. "Gerald— For God's sake, can you hear me?"

Try to understand— If—if I help you, can you move at all?"

He did not answer, but her ear, pressed to his heart, told her he was alive. She began to sob, torn between determination and despair. She knew what she must do. God alone knew if she could succeed, but she must try. She could not flee from Feathergrant, intent only on saving herself and the child. She must risk their safety to save Gerald, who had offered his life for hers. *If I fail, she thought, we shall all die. It is as simple as that.*

She felt suddenly quite calm. Her feet were steady as she ran back to the storage pit, measuring the distance and her strength. It was not many yards away, but she knew she could not drag Gerald to it. Perhaps it was as well. The effort and the drop might kill him. For the rest— She tore off her girdle and wound it around the baby's legs. She did not kiss him. Her face was hard as she whispered, "Don't be afraid, my darling. I'm coming back—soon—" and dropped him as gently as she could into the darkness. But she smiled when she heard his outraged grunt. Muffled as it was, she knew that he was furiously angry. *The Stacy men!* she thought, and dragged and pushed the heavy stone back into place, covering it with refuse.

Freed of the child, it took only a minute to return to Gerald. She thought his heart was a little stronger, now. She knelt, and kissed him with greater passion than she had ever shown him. She thought he stirred at her caress, but she was not sure. She said, "Gerald—I'm going, but I shall return. I'll get help—somehow—and I'll return."

She straightened, started, and ran back, covering him swiftly with fallen leaves, and broken branches. They would not be as safe as the storage pit, but unless the savages searched, or stumbled on him as she had done, they would suffice.

She had not gone a dozen feet when she saw a shadow in her path. It moved swiftly, slipped into the woods. It had been no more than darkness on darkness, but she knew it

was a woman, a woman moving stealthily. A woman who watched, herself unseen.

Nera.

She knew it as surely as though she had met her face to face, under a noonday sun. Nera had been watching, had seen her hide the baby. Whether she had seen Gerald did not matter. She would not betray Gerald. She went forward, her fingers steady on Gerald's pistol. When she was level with the spot where the shadow had disappeared, she fired.

She had not realized how close Nera was, that her blood would splatter her arm and throat as she fell. But even that did not stay her. She must be sure, sure. She bent, ran her hand over the quivering figure, found her temple, pressed the pistol to it, and fired again.

She was cold, shaking. Her arm tingled with the kick-back. The night seemed one mighty echo. But her hand was steady as she snatched the black girl's shawl, and bound it over her bright hair, and she drew a deep breath as she straightened.

I had to, she thought. *I had to*. But in her heart she knew that she was glad. Whatever happened, she would never again have to consider Nera. Whatever happened, Nera would not watch her. Whatever happened, Nera would never tell now what she knew.

She caught up her cloak and night rail, and fled on, into the darkness.

XVI

GERALD OPENED his eyes, yanked back to consciousness and pain by the sound of a shot.

Clarissa. He felt the name, rather than thought it—felt it as he had every hour since the London dawn when Clarissa had stepped from her doorway into his heart. *Clarissa.*

The name was suddenly more than feeling, more than thought. It was an urgency, a knowledge and terror, the power of all his will, and what life remained in him. He must warn Clarissa. That was why he was here. That was why he had ridden from the others, as they fled in their panic, paying them no heed even when someone shouted to him that Ajax's ship had been sighted below Shirley Hundred. That was why he had struck from the road into the forest trusting to force a trail by the sheer force and speed of his riding. His only chance had been to swing in a wide circuit around the swath of destruction the savages were cutting along the river. If he succeeded, he might be in time.

And he was in time. He had come abreast of them as the first flames rose from the great house at Rawlinsgap. After that—*Arrow that flieth by noonday, pestilence that walketh in darkness—*

He put up his hand, and touched the froth on his lips, and knew how great his hurt was. But it did not matter. He was in time. Lying in his anguish along the mare's neck, clinging blindly as his roweling spurs swept her forward in a final frenzy of speed, he was in time.

He knew it, as he reached Hannibal's cabin, the nearest building to the clearing's edge. Nera had come to the door, roused by the sound of his riding. She had screamed, as he slipped from the mare, falling to the ground at her feet. But he had told her to be still, to warn Clarissa.

And she had warned Clarissa. He knew that now. She had warned Clarissa—for Clarissa herself had come to him. Clarissa had knelt beside him, and he had told her of Ajax. Clarissa had kissed him, as if she loved him, and had said she would return.

His work was done. He closed his eyes gratefully. He was not afraid to die. Death, he discovered, was an old acquaintance. He had looked in his face a dozen times, in England, and found it unchanged here. He recognized it almost fondly, knowing he had no longer any will or great desire to outwit that one invincible antagonist, that one companion never absent from him since his birth hour.

Closing his eyes voluntarily on life, he realized wonderingly the great burden life had been, and felt it slipping from his weary shoulders, as he nestled his cheek to the cold earth, trustfully.

The earth. His earth, so soon to be Clarissa's. He was glad he had taken time to change his will. Clarissa would be loyal to the earth. And for the rest—for the rest—

He was thankful he need no longer vex his brain or heart with Ajax and Clarissa. Ajax and Clarissa, struggling still within life, must bear their own burden. Pitying them as he did with an all-understanding love, he could no longer share their burden. From that knowledge, a great peace flowed through him.

Through the night, with recurrent consciousness, he did not see his past life as dying men are supposed to do. Rather, he grasped a strange and troubled vision of the future, a future of evil and darkness, of compulsion and terror, of splendor and power and graciousness and greed, a future where his part lay dormant yet alive in the veins of Clarissa's sons.

In a flash of fevered comprehension, he knew that he was not of this land. He was not of the black soil of the South, nor, like Ajax, of the North's rock-battlemented coast. His dust would lie in its earth, but his spirit was England's, as

his fathers' had been. He was of the past, of its brilliance and bitterness, of its brittle desires and rooted loyalties. He was of the past, though he knew that the future, begotten of the old world's despair, had been brought forth to hope. He was of the past, but with the cutting of the birth cord the new generation had been freed. For a little, his children's children would follow the course of their fathers, but deep in his heart he knew. He had seen the look in the eyes of the young, those eyes turned toward horizons beyond the dream of their fathers. He was not of the land—but the land was his children's, forever.

XVII

AT FIRST, following the trail Gerald had broken with his riding, Clarissa thought, *I should have brought my baby*, and the idea of little Gerald, terrified and helpless in the darkness, overwhelmed her with compassion. But almost immediately, her ability to see a situation clear and unblurred by sentiment banished her regret. She could not have done what she must with the heavy struggling child handicapping every movement. Even as it was, she might not succeed. She had no illusion about what lay ahead.

But at least, she thought, at least, I shall have done my best.

Suddenly, she knew that that was all that mattered. Whatever came of it, whether she had to face herself through half a century to come, or whether she faced a sterner Judge before dawn broke, this was the fulcrum of her destiny. Effort was more important than accomplishment, as dreams are always more important than facts. Of all her lifelong struggle to seize and hold security, this night's unselfish madness would remain, alone significant.

She had known before she started that she could not reach Ajax unaided. But then, as now, she thought, *If I try, something will happen. Something must happen.* She did not try to determine what. Possibly some settler, miraculously escaped, returning after the raid had passed.

She still clung to the hope, knowing it hopeless, as she fought her way forward, with her throat swelled and eyes streaming from smoke, and the terror of sound nearing. The thin slippers she had thrust on in the first confusion were cut and broken. In them, her torn feet slipped ominously, and the sensation was harder to bear than the pain.

A low branch struck her face, like an arresting hand. She

stopped, aware that she had left the trail, and was plunging through underbrush.

Within a dozen steps, hardship had become danger, but she had been too intent to mark the change. Only the tumult of the attack had saved her from being discovered. She, huddled in shadow, forcing herself to listen, even as she recoiled from hearing.

A man screamed. It was Christopher Rawlins.

Clarissa, shuddering, knew what that scream meant. Nausea swept her, and she closed her eyes, then forced them open again. She had reached Rawlinsgap, without knowing it. Fighting her way forward, step by step, she had not noticed the gradually growing noise, had not realized how far she had come.

Now, peering through the underbrush, she saw why this had been. She must have lost the trail, and cut through the woods toward the river, with no sense of direction. She had come out behind the quarters, and their long low bulk had screened the flames of the great house, so that she had approached unwarned.

Even now, she could see nothing of what was happening, and the assurance of horror was more horrible because she could not. She found herself waiting to hear Amy's death cry as she had heard Christopher's, and because she could see nothing, heard it many times: in the yell of a savage, the shriek of a slaughtered ewe, the crow of a rooster roused by the fire to greet a dawn that it would never know.

Then sharply she knew one sound for what it was. Someone was running—running so near by that she could hear the shuddering tortured breathing.

The indented carpenter Amy had so proudly imported less than a month before fled within a yard of where Clarissa cringed in meager shadow and, like an animal catching a scent, paused, staring about for shelter.

She held her breath, but felt that he must feel the very intensity of her praying: *Not here, Lord—Don't let him come*

here— For already his pursuer, bent double with running, tomahawk raised, had rounded the quarters. The Indian passed as the Englishman had, so close she could have touched him.

Hysterically, she remembered the words of the leader Rawlins had recommended to young Ajax. The boy was gone, and Rawlins was dead, but the scene, the words, were alive by the strange magic of memory. Oliver Cromwell had said, "Pray God and keep the powder dry." Clarissa, kneeling in the shadows half a world away, with Gerald's pistol pressed to her heart, tightened her lips and steadied her hand, remembering.

Only when it was all over, and the Indian had gone, did she close her eyes, recalling Gerald lying as she had left him, and her baby, in the pit.

Not that, Lord! Dear Lord, merciful Lord, not that!

For she knew now, by the sudden quiet, that they had gone. They had gone on, to Feathergrant.

She pulled her cloak around her closer, and forced herself forward. Almost at her elbow, the crackle of flames warned her. She put out her hand. The back wall of the quarters was hot to her touch. She began to run, but the underbrush had already caught. The shawl slipped from her head, and a gush of fire singed her lashes and brows, and caught her hair. She forced back the terror in her throat, and pulled the shawl into place, and bent her slim back and drove forward, fighting for every painful breath. When she reached the clearing, her face was blackened with smoke, and the tears runneled it into a mask of horror.

The Indians had gone, and the flames of the great house were dying, but the ground was thick with embers. They burned through her slippers, and bedded in her bleeding feet, but she forced herself to go on, praying only that she might not see Christopher, or Amy. Somewhere in the chaos they must be, mutilated, horrible. If there was still life in them—

God help me, I can't. I haven't time now. I haven't time—

She had decided what she must do. Remembering Amy, she had remembered the canoe. Amy had managed it alone. Surely, if Amy had managed it, she could. It was the only way, the only hope left. Even now, she was too late to do what she had hoped, to stop them before they reached Feathergrant. She had never dreamed how swift they were. She had thought it must take hours, hours to destroy the work of a lifetime. All she could hope to do now was to get help, to return in time to save her baby, and Gerald.

But before she reached the riverbank, she knew that even that hope was vain. The canoe was gone. In the glow of the dying fire, she could see footsteps, the footsteps of a running woman, leading to the water's edge. Amy Rawlins had escaped. Amy Rawlins—who had no reason to live, no responsibility, now that Christopher was dead. Amy, whose future must be forever scarred by hideous recollection, and as that recollection faded with the years, grisly with recurrent nightmares. Amy was saved. And she—she, Clarissa, with her husband dying, and her baby hidden to starve—

She stumbled, and fell to her knees, and as she did so, saw something far out in the river. Something that moved. Amy—

Surely, if Amy saw her, knew that she was here— Surely, Amy would return. Amy would not let her die. Even if she loved Ajax—

And now, suddenly, she knew that this had been the thought behind all her reasons why Amy should not live, while she, Clarissa died. Amy loved Ajax.

Her heart pounded, and she forced herself to her knees, upright, for a single moment.

In that moment, the thing that she had seen in midstream swung around. It was not Amy's slender small canoe, with Amy in it. It was a large boat, filled with awful, shadowy figures.

She screamed aloud, and pitched forward, fainting.

XVIII

It was an hour past midnight when Ajax, roused by the watch, saw the first flame shoot up into the night sky.

Feathergrant! he thought, but he knew at once it was not Feathergrant. Feathergrant was a dozen miles distant, and this was near—near.

It had been a calm day, a quiet night. But for that, he would be at Feathergrant now, instead of lying at anchor, with only the watch and himself awake, for he had determined to take the ship with him, trusting Gerald's understanding for her name. They had had a stormy voyage, and everything had seemed so peaceful after it: the sheltered river, the contented homes, the greening fields. The second, the third fire rose, and he knew how false that peace had been.

He and the watch were running through the ship, rousing the crew. Already, the inherited ability to translate instant decision into action, the ability that the Stacy serfs and retainers had trusted through six centuries of border skirmishes and Crusades and foreign wars, had flung a dozen men to sheets and halyards. Whatever happened, the *Blessed Lady* must be saved. The *Blessed Lady*, and the boy who had scrambled to the deck, with bright eyes shining through his rumpled curls.

Wetting his finger in his mouth, Ajax held it to the wind. It was from the west, and very light. But it would suffice. The *Blessed Lady* was sensitive, easy to maneuver as a race horse. Cargoless, with a skeleton crew, even this breeze would carry her to Jamestown in safety. He and the others would take to the two small boats, trusting God and the darkness to conceal their movements.

He had no fear of his crew's reaction. They were free men like himself, ready to take a free man's responsibility. But even he had not foreseen their eagerness for what was, after all, his quarrel. He told them frankly where they were going, and what the odds would be. Most of them had been through the Indian forays in New England, all of them knew more than his swift words could tell. But there was a gaiety under the grimness with which they went over the side, testing pistol and musket, filling every inch of space in the small boats with ammunition. They had met neither privateer nor pirate in their voyage, and their supplies were high as their spirits.

Only one person was disconsolate over the arrangement. The little Ajax leaned over the rail of the *Blessed Lady*, and all the men's chiding could not stanch his tears, as they shoved off.

Ajax carried with him the memory of the boy's face, uncomprehending and reproachful, in the cautiously dimmed lantern light. It was as he had first known him, not as he had been these latter weeks, brown and robust, with a childish swashbuckling bravado that delighted the men. A hundred times, he had pictured Gerald's joy in young Ajax, a Stacy now, if there ever was one. He pictured it now, stubbornly, with fear that was prescience at his heart.

The raid had been confined to one bank, and, as he had expected, was sweeping toward Feathergrant. He ordered his boats to the opposite shore, where he hoped that under cover of distance and darkness they might reach their destination unsuspected and in time.

The flames were already dying down as they passed the first of the plantations attacked. Through a spyglass they saw the huddled ruins, but nothing moved against the smoldering glow. No living thing remained to tell of that night's tragedy.

The third, the fourth, the fifth, were as desolate. When they approached the sixth, the walls were still standing. By

the blazing warehouse, he recognized Rawlingsgap, and knew that the flames beyond marked Feathergrant.

"Pull over," he said, and the rowers knew only by the harshness of his voice how nearly they were at journey's end. But an instant later his sharp "Back water!" told them more.

Something was moving on the shore. Slowly, cautiously, against the massacre. Ajax thought, *An animal would have been driven before it*, and fought the darkness to see more than he could.

Even that moving point of shadow had disappeared, now. But there was something else, something that bobbed aimlessly on the water, with the vague lightness of a cockleshell. Peering through his glass, he knew it suddenly for what it was. Amy Rawlins's canoe. It was empty.

His glass swept back, along the bank. Incredibly, he discovered what he had so vainly sought, a moment before. As if in answer to his prayer, a figure rose, straightened, poised immovable and ghostly, against the dying fire. Then it crumpled, with pitiful eloquence, from his sight.

He closed his teeth over the oath of reluctance and despair that rose from his heart. "Pull in," he ordered, cursing alike the foolish recklessness that had made discovery possible, and the chivalrous necessity forcing the delay. *But I couldn't leave her*, he thought. *I couldn't leave any woman in that hell*. And he strove to salve his anxiety with the reflection that he could do what must be done briefly, that shortly he would have had to have gone inshore, anyway.

They cut across the current swiftly, making no effort now at concealment, pistols drawn and eyes steady. Nothing challenged their approach. New flames were rising from the plantation beyond Feathergrant, but, sure as he was that they marked the swift passage of the savages, he ordered his men to rest on their oars, a hundred yards offshore, while he searched every copse and thicket, every inch of embankment, with his glass.

Rawlingsgap was a place of the dead. Even the figure that had drawn them in no longer moved. After awhile, they proceeded cautiously, dipping their oars as silently, as seldom as they could. Even the fire was dying. Only the quarters still blazed. Probably, he thought, the Indians considered them not worth the time or effort of setting fire to, and they had caught from the other buildings, later.

A dozen feet from the bank, he signaled his men to stop, and he and one of the others went over the side, wading through shoulder-deep water, their way covered by the aimed muskets of their companions.

The man with Ajax stumbled as they reached shore. It took him a moment to get his footing. When he did, he held a scarf that Ajax recognized as Amy's. He pressed on, sure now that the figure he had seen silhouetted against the fire was hers.

It was some minutes before he located what he sought. The woman was lying on her face, shielded by overhanging branches. He stooped, put his hand on her side. She was alive, even breathing naturally. He thought she must have fainted, overcome by the night's terror, or the final exertion of moving the canoe, and felt a swift pity for her, sliding it to the water, only to realize that her nerveless fingers were unable to hold it, her strength unequal to the escape so nearly won.

He turned her over, gently. As he did so, the roof of the quarters fell in. By the light of showering sparks, he saw her face. It was blackened with smoke, contorted, unrecognizable. A singed shawl was pulled low across the forehead, knotted under the relaxed chin.

He thought, *She was in the house when they set fire to it, and they left her for dead.*

The lad who had come ashore with him returned. "There's a man yonder. Scalped."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Deader than Xerxes. One of the neatest jobs I ever saw."

Rawlins, Ajax thought. He said, "No one else?"

"Not even a dog. They've taken every living thing."

"We'll go on, then."

He knelt, and lifted the woman. He had not realized Amy was so slender, so light. He had thought of her as tall, and big-boned, a healthy, comely enough country woman. But he had never seen her unless Clarissa was near by. Clarissa, exquisite and fragile as a fairytale.

"Come," he said sharply, and plunged into the water.

The woman in his arms stirred, moaned. Something in the sound caught at his heart. He put up his hand, and tore Nera's shawl from Clarissa's bright, singed hair.

XIX

THE CHILL of the water shocked Clarissa to consciousness. She thought, *I am dying. This is the Great River*, and forced her stiff and swollen lids apart, and looked into Ajax's eyes.

In the red darkness she knew him, and hope struck through her, as the first courageous lance of green pierces the frost-hard earth. Her cracked lips formed his name but no sound came. She thought, *I am dead. This is what death is. Pain and confusion and hope, when hope is done.*

Ajax bent his head to hers. "Clarissa," he said, and she knew that she lived. All the living world lay in her name, spoken by Ajax: the creak of the rowlocks, the muted talk of the men, the lapping water, the hushed crackle of the dying flames. She remembered where she was and why she was there.

In the minute since he had recognized her, Ajax had not moved. He stood foursquare to the current, staring incredulously through the flickering shadows into her bruised, smoke-blackened face, chilled alike with shock and the horror of realizing how nearly he had lost her forever. His arms tightened, a wall of strength around her helplessness, a barrier against death itself.

Through the only knowledge that mattered, the knowledge that he held Clarissa in his arms, other thoughts moved slowly. *Clarissa is here. This is not really Rawlinsgap. It only looks like it. It is actually Feathergrant. And that scalped man must be—* "No!" he cried aloud, "No!"

As if she answered his thought, Clarissa said, "Hurry. . . . Hurry, in God's Name. . . . Gerald, and my baby—" Her words revived her. She struggled in his arms, leaned past him, stared into the shadowy boat, fell back with a cry.

"Where is he? What have you done with my son?" Her words cracked with fear. "Not Ajax! Dear God—not Ajax, too!"

In that cry, the man who held her discovered all that she had striven to hide even from herself. Before the knowledge, even the portent of that word "too" lost significance. Clarissa loved his son as she had never loved the son of Gerald. She loved him with a passion and bitterness and self-dread that shook the very foundation of her reason. She loved him as she had loved his father.

He said against her hair, "He is safe, Clarissa. Our son is safe."

He felt her shuddering sob, and her head drooped against him, as if she yielded all the strength of her long deceit. "Hurry," she moaned, "Hurry—" and then, with stabbing recollection, "The baby— I put him in the pit. And Gerald is hurt. Oh, in God's Name, tell them to make haste!"

He lifted her into the boat, and she crumpled between their feet, in the small space they could make for her. Her bright head fell back on Ajax's knee. She made no move, no sound, as the longboat sped through the water, but the force of her will seemed to flow from her spent body with an urgency beyond Ajax's command.

The men knew neither who she was nor whence she came but they felt her will driving them forward. Her weakness generated strength, and their muscles tautened and the veins in their temples pounded with effort in her service. When at last they put in and saw what she must see, their eyes swept back to her with understanding, but free of that cheap pity which is tribute to impotence.

She did not open her eyes when Ajax lifted her, and for a moment he dared hope that she had fainted, and that full and awful knowledge might be postponed. But as he stepped ashore, she slipped from his arms, as if she would feel the

earth of Feathergrant beneath her torn burned feet, to strengthen her against what was to come.

No one spoke, and when he would have drawn her to him and hidden her eyes against his breast, something in the lift of her head warned him that if he touched her now he would lose her forever.

Little by little, her moving eyes added the sum of desolation: the burned warehouse, the quarters, the stable; the charred and broken orchard; the churned fields, where the Indian braves had driven to deliberate frenzy the stolen herds; and last of all, the great house.

Two chimneys and the east wall clawed at the tattered sky, as if to drag the last rags of smoke over the desolation that was Feathergrant.

She made no sound, but nodded slowly, and Ajax knew that there was no bruised plant, no fallen stone she had not marked. Yet in the eyes she turned to him at last was neither weakness nor appeal. The cold pride of her voice barred from the destruction all who had not shared the building.

"Why do you wait?" she asked. "Did I not tell you Gerald—and the baby—" But she could not continue. She stopped, biting her cracked lips, cheating her words of softness, of betrayal. Yet Ajax read in the tense monotony of her tone the cost of her control, the years the moment's pause had spanned.

When they left her, she sank upon the ground. In this graying twilight before dawn she saw beyond the jagged ruins. She saw the heat of summer and winter's deathlike cold, the days of toil and planning and self-denial, the nights when she had yielded her unwilling flesh to Gerald's passion, the flood and drought and storms of the past years, and finally, the testing of this night. They were all there, in a blackened forest, walling ruin.

Her quick, indrawn breath daggered her smoke-raw lungs.

"Gone," she whispered. "Gone." But even as the word escaped, she knew it was not true. They were in the strength of her will, the power of her spirit, the force of the courage that already looked beyond the breaking day.

For the rest—The cabin still stood where she had stayed when she first came from England. A hundred times, she had asked Gerald to have it pulled down, but his sentiment had kept it standing.

"It will suffice," she said, and forced herself to her feet, and started slowly upward toward the great house.

Ajax came suddenly around the ruins. He was carrying the yelling child, crying out above his screams that he was safe. She held out her arms, but at the sight of her smoke-blackened face, the baby shrieked in terror, and broke from him. One of the crew ran after him, but Clarissa called:

"Let him go, poor tot. He has been too long pent!" She smiled at Ajax, and shook her head. "The Stacy men," she said, "the Stacy men!"

He knelt beside her without answering. He had dipped his kerchief in the well, and now wiped her face as tenderly as a woman. She let him do it, knowing that he was trying to say something, that this gesture was only a postponement, while he fought for words and courage.

"My boys are rounding up the blacks," he said finally. "For the most part, they are thankful enough to come."

He paused, but still she knew he had not said what he must. "Thank you," she said. "When the place is cleared a little, it will be better."

"As soon as they have done what they can, I shall send one of the boats back to Jamestown for Ajax."

She drew away from him, staring. "For Ajax? But—Why?" Her eyes glittered, her teeth clamped her swollen lip. "What is there—here—for him?" Her small hand flashed and fell, compassing in one broken gesture all the fruitless years.

Ajax said, "All that I have is his. And yours, Clarissa."

In his eyes, she saw all that he would tell her, and could not. They had found Gerald. And he was dead.

Ajax said, "Clarissa— It is only a matter of days, now, before they must convict Laud. Every ship brings tidings, and I know that that is so. When you are a little recovered, why don't you take the boys and return to Stacys Holding?"

Stacys Holding. At the words, all the old, inexplicable antagonism surged through her. She knew as she had known the night of the storm that she could never accept dependence on Ajax. For a little she had believed herself changed by the dread that she had killed him, and the full stark knowledge of what that would have meant to her. Now, knowing as she had then that his love was her life, all she had been or ever hoped to be, she also knew that she must meet him eye to eye, yielding or denying by her own will.

She thought bitterly, *Why am I not like other women, content to be coddled or laid aside like a beloved puppet?*

She looked at Ajax, and read the answer in his eyes.

Ajax could not love a puppet, a mere living echo of his will and mind. Only in his imagination had he ever loved the Blessed Lady of the London drawing rooms. Beyond the blue and gold, beyond the fragility and downcast eyes, his instinct had known her as she was, had known that to possess her must mean conflict, so long as they both should live. They two were one, and yet as man's two natures, complementing and frustrating, the eternal struggle within unity.

"Stacys Holding?" she said, "What have I to do with Stacys Holding? Do you think I shall return—there—to be the 'guest' of my son, until he gets himself a wife, and she proclaims herself the mistress?"

Her eyes swept past him, to the ruined buildings, the destroyed fields. She dug her fingers into the earth and ashes, and twisted the parched grass around them. She looked into

11

Ajax's eyes, and laughed, and her laugh was the foundation of her future.

"This is mine," she said softly, "this is mine."

Ajax bent and kissed the hand that gripped the soil. "As I am, Clarissa. Body and soul—yours."

He sighed, and rose and left her. After a while, she also forced herself to rise, and started upward, again.

A patch of green caught her attention. Gerald's sundial. The box was broken, but the roots still seized the earth, the shadow still struck true as the sun.

"You and love encompass all the hours of my life."

Staring at it, the slow tears filled her eyes. Finally, they flowed over, and made her face a comic mask of pity.

"Oh, God," she prayed, "grant that it was so always! Grant that he never knew."

The prayer, sprung in full sincerity from Clarissa's heart, was Gerald's requiem. Before she had whispered the last word, she saw them coming: Ajax, and one of his young men, carrying Gerald home.

She made a small gesture, and went to meet them. They brought him forward slowly, and laid him beneath the Stacy arms.

She neither moved nor spoke. She only stood there, looking down, swaying a little with fatigue and pain.

After a while, the young man left them, and she put out her hand to Ajax, and they two knelt beside him.

Beyond the wall, the sun moved slowly upward. It touched the Stacy motto: IN HONOR, STRENGTH. It illuminated the javelin, still firm in two right hands. It blazoned the broken feather, and so falling, slipped a golden chaplet over Gerald's curls.